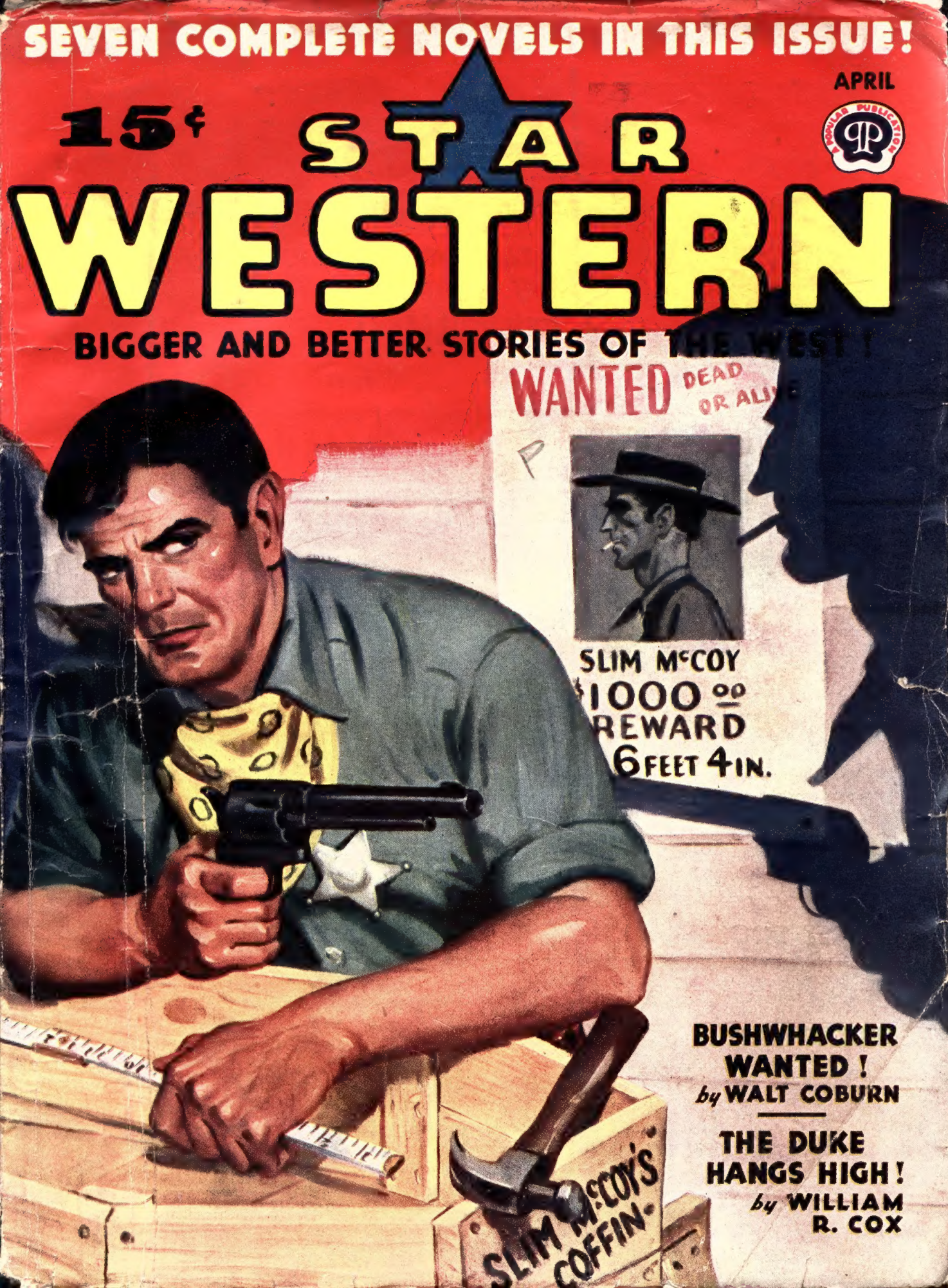
SEVEN COMPLETE NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

APRIL

15¢

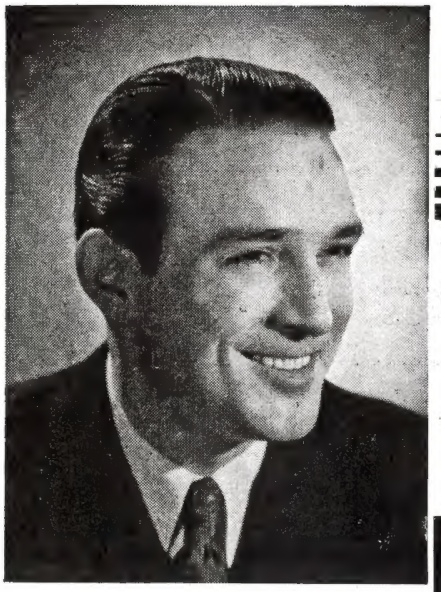
STAR WESTERN

BIGGER AND BETTER STORIES OF THE WEST!



BUSHWHACKER WANTED!
by WALT COBURN

THE DUKE HANGS HIGH!
by WILLIAM R. COX



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1st Lieutenant in Signal Corps
"I cannot divulge any information as to my type of work, but I can say that N.R.I. training is certainly coming in mighty handy these days." RICHARD W. ANDERSON (address omitted for military reasons.)

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SEVEN SHORT NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

STAR WESTERN

BIGGER AND BETTER STORIES OF THE WEST

VOLUME THIRTY-TWO APRIL, 1944 NUMBER THREE

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Seven Complete Short Novels ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

BUSHWHACKER WANTED!.....*WALT COBURN* 8
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WILD MEN IN BUCKSKIN.....*TOM ROAN* 24
The one man who had a chance to save a covered-wagon caravan of fear-stampeded greenhorns from slaughter was a branded killer who—so swore those tenderfoot wagoneers—had marked them all for murder!

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DEAD NESTERS MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS.....*ART LAWSON* 70
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RED WAR HITS THE FUR TRAILS.....*HARRY F. OLMSTED* 84
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Aided by the mysterious passenger inside the closed carriage, Clint Farrand managed to outdistance the men who sought his life. . . . Yet his unknown savior must soon sign his death-warrant within the walls of Hell's Hacienda!

★ ★ Star Features ★ ★

THE BRANDING CORRAL.....*CONDUCTED BY STRAWBOSS* 6
Light your saddles, amigos, while we make *habla* about the West, both old and new.

UP THE TRAIL.....*A DEPARTMENT* 113
When blood and gunsmoke brought victory to embattled pilgrims.

MAY ISSUE OUT APRIL 7th!

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Conducted by Strawboss

POSSIBLY the only Western train hold-up which was undertaken not for profit but purely as a matter of personal pride is told to us by John Ledbetter, of Chicago.

Dear Strawboss:

Until recently I never knew that my family was distinguished by having among its members an amateur train hold-up man—perhaps one of the first ever to stop the old C.P.R. on its first Western run.

To see him tool the six-horse team up to the end of the line, flashing by with a pennon of dust streaming behind the Concord and bring the brightly-painted coach to a halt every time in the same precise spot was a sight that must have thrilled even such great drivers as Hank Monk and other immortals of the reins.

However, in 1869, the famous golden spike was driven at Promontory Point between two puffing, bell-stacked locomotives, one facing West and the other East, which ceremony spelled the beginning of the end of the stage line for which my ancestor drove.

Through the hotel windows he saw the gathering of the crowd which, already hours beforehand, was collecting to welcome the first train west. Flags were streaming; the crowd was dressed in its best to do honor to the new arrival. But it was a sight which brought no pleasure to the ex-stage-driver. He tossed off his final drink, arose from his seat with a certain alcoholic dignity and strode to his room. He emerged a few moments later, dressed in his best yellow, striped tailored pantaloons, the red Russia-leather boots, the long linen duster and heavy gold watch chain across his lean middle.

He stepped out to the stable, and a few moments more was astride his private horse, headed East, along the right of way. In one hand he carried the ten-gauge shotgun.

A few miles from town, he stopped the horse, dismounted, and took his stance, like Roderick Dhu, in the exact center of the right-of-way. He had not long to wait.

The earth-shaking vibrations signalling the oncoming of the train were interrupted by a long-drawn-out whistle. My ancestor straightened to his full height of six-feet four, and threw up the scattergun just as the engine puffed its way around a curve.

Closer the iron monster approached, but my relative paid no heed to the angry whistle of the engineer. Brakes ground, and at last the train came to a thunderous pause.

Passengers craned their necks from the windows; from the rear car certain railroad officials lifted their voices in angry inquiry, while from the cab the engineer and fireman came bouncing out.

"Back up, damn your eyes!" my relative roared. "Take this fire-spittin' contraption back where it come from, or, by the saints, I'll throw you into your own fire-box. It's ruinin' good men an' good horses!"

Railroad men are not likely to let such a challenge go unanswered, and this train-crew was no exception. With a roar of conflict they leaped upon my relative, but they were met by another berserk bellow. Forgotten now was the shotgun; it seemed that he had been waiting most of his life to engage in just such a battle, fist for fist, blow for blow.

At length, battered and bleeding, the ex-stageman was overcome by sheer force of numbers, unceremoniously heaved clear of the iron trail, and the engine crew, a good deal the worse for wear, climbed back and continued on their way.

While my ancestor's lone-hand war against the coming of the railroad could not change nor delay the course of history, I still get a chuckle out of one man who threw away his shotgun and tackled with his bare fists the implacable iron horse. It is satisfying to note that my ancestor rolled the Concords and for many years—until the late 80's—and the sight of him tooling the coaches was familiar to many old-timers in the Sierra Nevadas.

From William Hunter, of Los Angeles, comes the following:

Dear Strawboss:

While many of your readers, and possibly you, yourself, always think of the Winter of the Big Die as that of 1886-87, I'd like to call your attention to the bitter and tragic winter that preceded that one by about fifteen years, but which, so far as I know, seems to have escaped the attention of almost everyone, except those who experienced it.

You remember that Kansas, during the late Sixties and early Seventies was host to an ever increasing number of Texas cattle. It was estimated, in 1871 that more than 200,000 Texas cattle had been shoved north for grazing, to the alarm of the Kansans. Texas men, Texas horses and Texas cattle, indeed, in the opinion of many farmers and stock-raisers at that time, bid fair to overrun the state.

However, a Norther blew up that winter—1871-2, which was the first of those disastrous and merciless storms to hit the cow-country. Rain and sleet overran the buffalo

(Please turn to page 111)

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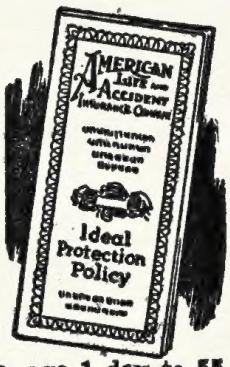

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Sex..... Height..... Weight..... Age.....
Describe Occupation.....
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Name of Beneficiary Relationship
Are you in good health?.....Now Carried..... Amount of Ins.
Check if under Age 46 and Double Amount is wanted. ☐ .....
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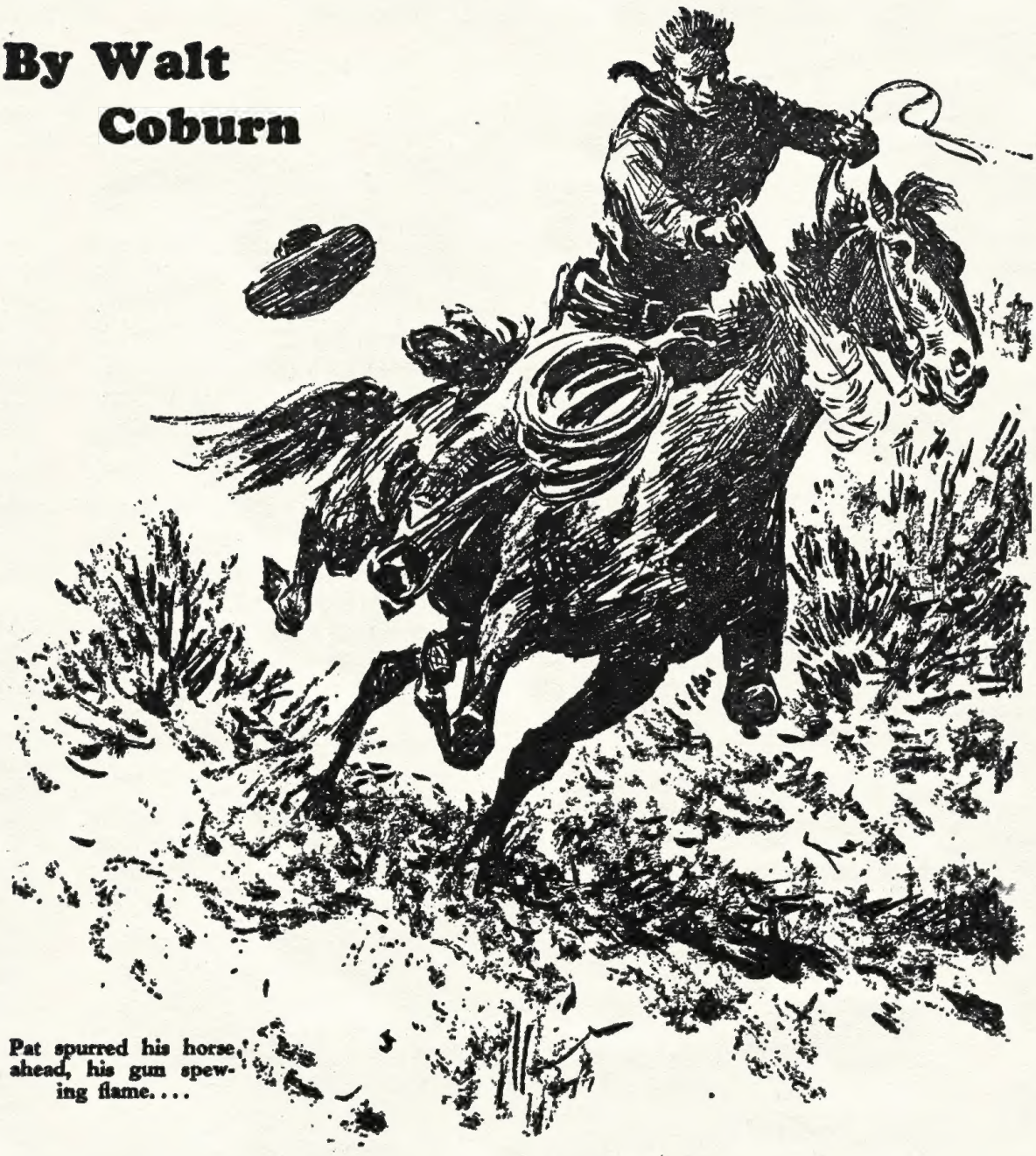
By Walt Coburn



Pat spurred his horse ahead, his gun spewing flame....

Mart Cullum figured he'd dealt himself out of the hangnoose and into a murdered man's ranch—with the youngster he had framed for that back-shooting crime doomed to a life-time of slavery, or a quick, sure death on the law's grim gallows!

CHAPTER ONE

Turn the Killers Loose!

WHOEVER had dry-gulched big Jim Bender had done a good job of it. Half a dozen .30-30 bullets had drilled him, and any one of those shots, according to the horse doctor who was the county coroner, would have done the job.

"Looks like somebody kinda had it in fer Bender," he put it. And it was a typical cow-country understatement.

Just about everybody in that part of the Montana cow country came to the big funeral.

BUSHWHACKER WANTED!

Great Cattle-land Novel

There was a lot of whiskey drunk and nobody—not even the circuit-rider preacher who presided at the grave—had anything good to say about the dead man. But the whiskey-talk never loosened their tongues, and every man of them eyed his neighbor warily.

Sheriff Bob Hale didn't seem to be bothered much, one way or another. He had a few drinks and moved around among the crowd with his easy grin, keeping his eyes and ears open. He didn't know who had bushwhacked the big cowman and he wasn't working up much of a sweat about it.

Just the same, there was a tense feeling, an uneasiness and cold dread there. And the taut nerves of every man who made up what someone called the big gatherment of Jim Bender's enemies were pulled to the breaking point that evening. That was after the crowd had returned from the burial and gathered in the saloons.

Jason — Cash-on-the-Line — Millsap, bank president of Long Coulee, went from one saloon to the next. He was a tall, rawboned man with pale gray eyes and a limp. He had a twisted grin on his lean face as he handed

each saloonman one of the printed pamphlets he carried.

"Tack this up somewhere on the back bar where the customers can read it," he said in his flat voice, and walked on to the next saloon.

By "this" he meant a boldly lettered notice offering a thousand dollars reward for the man or men who had killed Jim Bender.

Sheriff Bob Hale was as surprised as the next man. He tackled Jason Millsap about it at the First and Last Chance.

"Who sold you chips in the game, Jason?" he asked.

Cash-on-the-Line Millsap grinned twistedly. "Jim Bender had these printed more than a year ago, right after he lost those lawsuits against Mart Cullum and Jake Gore. And just about the time Pat Patterson jumped his bail on that beef butcherin' charge Bender had against 'im. Any further questions, Sheriff?"

"Only one I kin think of right now, Jason," said the slow-spoken law-officer. His puckered blue eyes twinkled with cold amusement. "Let's have it, Hale."

"Who gits Jim Bender's JB outfit?"

"Jim Bender left no heirs. I'm not quite certain about the legal procedure. The bank holds Jim Bender's paper. Perhaps the court will decide on a sheriff's sale. The highest bidder in that case would assume the mortgage and pick up those notes. I doubt if any man or any couple of men who might have a covetous eye on the JB outfit could raise sufficient cash to pick up the late James Bender's paper. Good-day, Sheriff."

But before he reached the swinging half doors of the saloon his way was blocked by Mart Cullum.

Jason Millsap was a six-footer, but the six feet, seven inches of Mart Cullum dwarfed him. Cullum wore high heeled boots and his high-crowned Stetson added to his long stature. His graying hair was coarse and black, and under a drooping black mustache his mouth was pulled into a flat grin.

Right behind the giant Cullum stood the short, bull-necked Jake Gore. Gore had tow-colored graying hair and a broken nose.

"Mebbyso, Millsap," said Mart Cullum bluntly, "me'n my pardner Jake Gore don't like it."

"You don't like what, Cullum?"

"That sneakin' coyote way you just taken to throw the blame of Jim Bender's killin' onto us. Just the dirty way you done it kinda riles a man." Cullum's voice had a sharp twang.

"Yeah." Jake Gore's deep chested voice was a growl. "Back it with proof, Millsap. Right here an' right now. Or you don't git out the door."

Jason Millsap eyed the two cowmen coldly and without a trace of anything like fear. Then he turned to Bob Hale.

"Arrest Martin Cullum and Jake Gore for the murder of James Bender, Sheriff. And I want it understood that I'm unarmed. If these two men shoot me, it will be cold-blooded murder. Do your sworn duty, Sheriff."

"I've got no kinda warrants, Millsap," said the easy-going law officer. "It's customary—"

"I'm preferring the charges. I'll produce enough evidence at court to hang these two men. Are you afraid of these men, Hale? If you are, turn in your law badge, and we'll get a sheriff who has sufficient courage to fulfill his oath of office."

Mart Cullum and Jake Gore exchanged quick looks. Gore nodded. The lanky Cullum nodded and grinned.

"All right, Bob. Let's mosey along to your calaboose. Me'n Jake will go without ary fuss."

"Lemme take ol' Cash-on-the-Line apart first," growled the short, heavy set Jake Gore.

"Save it, Jake," Cullum shook his head, "till we git outa jail. Millsap can't collect that thousand bucks reward unless we're convicted an' sent to the pen. And that'll take a lot of doin'."

★

SHERIFF BOB HALE scratched his head and grinned uncertainly. Then the saloonman said they'd better have one on the house before the sheriff locked 'em up for the night. And that gave Jason Millsap, who never drank or smoked, his chance to walk out. Which he did. And the eyes of every man in the crowded saloon watched him go.

Something of the tension was broken now. Mart Cullum and Jake Gore were under arrest for the killing of Jim Bender. Thus the finger of suspicion was no longer pointed at the lesser enemies of the cowman who had been waylaid and murdered. Their whiskey would taste better now. Just the same, they kept watching Cullum and Gore.

That tough pair of cowmen were taking it too easy. Lined up at the bar on either side of the sheriff, they still packed their guns and were joshing the law officer, like they were slipping something over on Jason Millsap.

"Cash-on-the-Line," chuckled the lanky Mart Cullum, "and his double-barreled words. That penny-pinchin', picayune dude!"

Anybody who could read and write was a damned dude to the illiterate Cullum, who could read only newspaper print and signed his Boxed Cross brand instead of his name.

"He'll play hell gittin' a conviction," growled Jake Gore. "Drink up, fellers, I'm buyin'."

They all took a look at that reward dodger Jim Bender had had printed, so Jason Millsap claimed, a year before he'd been killed. Then the saloonman took it and tacked it up on his back bar. He gave Cullum and Gore each a bottle to take along.

They turned over their guns to Sheriff Bob Hale at the little log jail. Told him to fetch 'em over a big supper, that they wanted one big square meal on the county before they got turned loose.

They had reckoned too much on crowding Jason Millsap's hand, for that midnight supper was the first of many slimmer meals they were destined to eat behind jail bars.

When they were taken to the larger jail at the county seat, they were locked up in separate cells on a first degree murder charge and without bail, before they could get together on a story that would hold up in court. And before they could establish any real alibi for themselves or for each other.

They had been pardners of a sort when they went to jail together, but before the end of their separate trials they were bitter enemies. Their trials were hard fought and expensive, but in the end they were turned free.

There had not been enough undisputable evidence to convict either man for first degree murder, yet before they were set free, a clever and ruthless county attorney had the two cowmen accusing each other of the crime.

"Hang Jake Gore if you got to swing somebody fer killin' that damned Jim Bender," snarled the lanky and desperate Mart Cullum on the witness stand. "Jake's the feller that drygulched Bender!"

"Mart Cullum laid fer Jim Bender an' bushwhacked 'im," swore Jake Gore. "I'd be proud to spring the gallows trap from under Cullum's big feet."

Each of them gave approximately the same reason why the other had killed Jim Bender.

Big Jim Bender had been a land grabber. When the state began its big survey of all the land within its boundaries, Bender had gotten panicky. His was a big outfit and he ran two round-up wagons with Mart Cullum as one of his wagon bosses, while Jake Gore ramrodded the other round-up.

Bender picked out two of the best spots on the range he had been holding and paid Cullum and Gore each five hundred dollars to file on those two chunks of land and the water rights that went with them. Cabins, barns, sheds, fenced haylands were already on the two ranches. All that Cullum and Gore had to do was to live there so many months out of each year until they were given deeds to the two ranches.

This they did. And more. They each registered a brand and bought themselves a few head of cattle. Bender's JB iron could be worked into Mart Cullum's Boxed Cross or into Jake Gore's brand he called the Currycomb. They had bought those cattle with the five hundred dollars Bender had given them. And they each refused to deed over their ranches or sell their irons to Jim Bender.

"Jake Gore's built up his Currycomb herd with a long rope and a runnin' iron," swore Mart Cullum. "Like as not Bender ketched him workin' one of his JB cows into his Currycomb. Jake Gore had to either kill Jim Bender or sign over his outfit fer a total loss. So he killed Bender. Me, I was at my home ranch the night Jim Bender was dry-gulched. Jake Gore's your huckleberry. Hang the short complected son!"

"Every man in this courtroom," growled Jake Gore on the witness stand, "knows that Cullum's bin swingin' a hungry loop. Jim Bender ketched him with his runnin' iron hot. Cullum had to either kill Bender or go to the pen fer rustlin'. I was drunk with my head under me at a whiskey peddler's camp in the breaks the night Cullum bushwhacked Jim Bender. I fetched the whiskey peddler here to court to prove where I was. Where's Mart Cullum's witnesses fer his alibi that night?"

Mart Cullum finally produced a witness to establish his alibi. This witness was none other than a young sandy-haired, freckled cowpuncher named Pat Patterson, whom Jim Bender had had arrested for butchering a JB beef.

Patterson had been riding the JB rough string when Bender got panicked about being sent to the pen for illegal fencing of government and state owned land. He had located the young bronc-rider on another of his line-camp ranches. When Bender had backed out on his deal to give Pat Patterson five hundred dollars, young Pat had said all right, he'd stay on his ranch and take it out in beef.

Jim Bender had either caught him as he swore he had, or framed Pat Patterson on the beef butchering.

Mart Cullum had gone cash bail for young Pat Patterson. And when it looked like a cinch bet that the law was going to railroad him to prison, Pat had ridden over to the Cullum ranch.

"I'm quittin' the country, Mart. I can't stand goin' to the pen. I'd die there. You went bail for me—a thousand dollars. I'll pay you back if I have to rob a bank for the money."

Then Pat Patterson came back without the money. The young bronc-twister had lost weight and there was a haggard look in his gray eyes and he looked ten years older. He told Mart Cullum he was riding to town and giving himself up to Sheriff Bob Hale.

"I'd rather plead guilty, Mart, and do a stretch in the pen, than be dodging an' lookin'

back acrost my shoulder the rest of my life like a coyote. I'm goin' to town in the mornin'."

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THEY were eating breakfast the next morning at the Cullum place when a cowpuncher rode up with the news that Jim Bender had been killed.

"Go back to your hideout in the badlands, button," Mart Cullum had told Pat. "If Bender's dead, then there's nobody to back that beef butcherin' charge ag'in yuh. Hang an' rattle. Lemme handle it fer yuh. Don't quit your hideout till I send for yuh. And don't rabbit on me. You're into me fer a thousand bucks. Don't fergit it. I might need yuh."

Trapped and desperate, Mart Cullum had sent for Pat Patterson.

"My lawyer's got that indictment ag'in you squashed. All you got to do is take the stand and swear me'n you was together all that night when Jim Bender got hisself dry-gulched."

"But we weren't together all night. You pulled out after supper to go over to Jake Gore's place. You didn't git back till just before daybreak, Mart. I was awake when you rode up."

"Which would you ruther do, button? Take the stand and tell that judge an' that smart-aleck county attorney that men'n you was together all that night at my place? Or spend fifteen years makin' horsehair bridles at the Deer Lodge pen? My lawyer's got you over the big barrel. What's the harm? I never killed Jim Bender. Jake Gore done it. Which-away you gonna jump, button?"

Pat Patterson was young. He loved his freedom. A prison term would kill him. In his cowpuncher heart he knew it.

"You win, Mart. I'll alibi you. Tell your lawyer to put me on the witness stand."

Jake Gore was turned loose first. Then Pat Patterson's alibi freed Mart Cullum, who was taking young Pat back to the ranch with him.

"You gotta work out that thousand bucks you owe me, button," Mart Cullum said again.

Pat Patterson felt trapped. He told the lanky Cullum he figured he'd paid off that thousand dollars when he took the stand and perjured himself.

"Sheriff Bob Hale tells me I kin claim my own ranch again. I'd like to go back there. I'll manage somehow to pay you that thousand bucks if you'll give me mebbyso a year's time. I won't coyote on you."

Cullum's trap-like teeth clicked and his flat lips twisted under the drooping mustache. "You're damn tootin' yuh won't coyote on me, button. Live at your own place if you've a mind to. But you're workin' fer Mart Cullum till you pay off the last dollar. . . . At forty a month you kin figger out with pencil an' paper how long it'll take. Or you kin do like I tell yuh an' wipe it off in two-three months."

Pat Patterson watched the look in Cullum's opaque black eyes and knew what the lanky man meant.

"Makin' JB brands into Boxed Crosses? Not when a man like Jason Millsap owns that outfit."

"I was thinkin' about that double-crossin' snake, Jake Gore. Jake done his damndest to hang me fer a killin' he knowed I never done. Before I'm done with that son, I'll have 'im bitin' hisself like a shot rattler an' dyin' of his own dirty poison. And bet your chances on this, button: Jake Gore will fight us back. But he won't go whinin' ner squawlin' to the Law. And he'll be tryin' to hamstring me, the way I'm goin' after his hocks."

"I don't know what your game is, Mart. But I don't like it."

"Mebbyso you don't like a lot uh things you're gonna have to swaller, button. But the directions says take it. You're my hired man."

So the two trials were over and Mart Cullum was rearing to get back to his ranch. He wanted his cartridge belt and six-shooter right now.

"Hold on, Mart," Sheriff Bob Hale told him. "The boss says you ain't to git turned loose with no gun till you put up a five hundred dollar cash peace bond. . . . Jason Millsap claims you'n Jake threatened 'im."

By "the boss," Bob Hale meant the county sheriff. Bob was just a deputy sheriff with headquarters at Long Coulee. He listened with indifferent attention to the lanky cowman's cussing there at the county jail.

The trial expenses had been heavy, and now he'd had to borrow money from Ian Mayer at the First and Last Chance at Long Coulee. He didn't know if he could get Mayer to put up any five hundred dollar peace bond. And why didn't that damned skinflint Cash-on-the-Line Millsap buy hisself a gun and take his own part instead of cry-babyin' to the Law?

Deputy Sheriff Bob Hale said that Ian Mayer had put up five hundred buck peace bond for Jake Gore and he reckoned the saloonman would kick through for Mart.

"Jake had to borrow money, too?"

"Hell, yes."

Mart Cullum felt better. He was glad Jake Gore had been that badly bent for money.

Ian Mayer hadn't missed so much as five minutes of the trial. He was a paunchy, genial, back-slapping Irishman with a sense of humor and a good business head. Most of the little ranchers used him for a banker. He held more of their paper than Millsap's Bank.

He put up the peace bond and told Mart to drop around at the First and Last Chance on his way to the ranch.

"And I'll give you your ca'tridge belt and gun, Mart. I got 'em."

CHAPTER TWO

The Devil Brands a Stray

JAKE GORE was standing at the bar when Mart Cullum came in with Pat Patterson and Sheriff Bob Hale. Gore didn't have a gun buckled on, and when the lanky Cullum started for him with his fists, Jake Gore came halfway to meet him, growling like a bulldog.

Ian Mayer's voice halted the two cowmen before they tangled. The saloonman chuckled and winked at Sheriff Bob Hale.

"Ain't the pair av yez fergettin'," he leaned across the bar, "that a peace bond covers all kinds av a rookus. Fists, boots, bitin' *and* guns. 'Tis peaceful as sleepin' babes ye'll both be or I lose five hundred apiece on yez. Peace, then, the two av yez!" Ian Mayer's brogue got thick when he was excited. "Cuss it outa yer systems."

Mart Cullum and Jake Gore stood there, crouched to spring. Then they began cussing out one another, with nobody but Ian Mayer and Pat Patterson and Sheriff Bob Hale for an audience. And before they had finished neither of them had left anything unsaid about the other.

It came out then and there, for the first time, that Mart Cullum and Jake Gore had planned on killing Jim Bender. Bender had told both of them that he was going to Long Coulee to talk things over with his partner and backer, Jason Millsap, and that he and Millsap would send both Cullum and Gore to the pen for cattle rustling unless that pair signed over their outfits to him, Jim Bender.

"You didn't meet me here at the First and Last Chance like you promised, Gore. I waited till I got weary. Then started fer home. I found Jim Bender dead."

"You're damned tootin' you found 'im dead on your way home, Cullum." Jake Gore's growl filled the saloon. "Because you'd a'ready killed him on your way to town. I started fer town. But when I rode up on Jim Bender's carcass layin' along the wagon road, I turned back."

"Then that whiskey peddler lied when he taken the witness stand to alibi you, Gore?"

"Just like Pat Patterson perjured hisself to clear you, Cullum. Pat owed you a thousand dollars. The whiskey peddler was beholdin' to me when I ketched him red handed a-butcherin' one of my steers."

So there went their alibis, and with three witnesses listening.

Pat Patterson shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Sheriff Bob Hale was staring hard at him, and the law officer wasn't grinning at all. Cullum and Gore fell suddenly silent.

"Where was you, Pat," Sheriff Bob Hale asked quietly, "about the time Jim Bender got dry-gulched that moonlight night?"

"I ain't sayin'." Pat's voice was steady, defiant. There was a stubborn set to his square jaw.

"They send a man to the pen for perjury, Pat," said the law officer. "And you had a mighty good reason to kill Jim Bender. Looks like you move up into first place as the prime suspect for Bender's murder.... Better watch your step."

Ian Mayer cut in quickly before Pat lost his temper and did something he'd regret.

"Cash-on-the-Line Millsap don't smoke ner drink, but he'd be a tough nut to crack in a poker game. He played both ends ag'in' the middle and he got the results he wanted. Faith an' he niver had much hopes av convictin' Mart Cullum or Jake Gore on that charge av first degree murder. But he did git the two av yez jumpin' at each other's throats, callin' one another dirty fightin' names. And the costs av the trial a-bustin' the pair av yez. And neither av yez with brains enough to see that Jason Millsap was laughin' up the sleeve av his coat all the time. 'Tis time the pair av yez had a drink and shook hands."

"When I shove my hand at Jake Gore," snarled the lanky Mart Cullum, "there'll be a gun in it. I'll shake hands with his dead carcass."

"And you better be quick-triggered, yuh long-geared, yellow-bellied snake!" growled Jake Gore. "Because mine'll be spittin' lead with your brand on the bullets."

"In which case," Ian Mayer shoved a couple of legal looking documents and a pen and bottle of ink across the bar, "you better sign these."

"What are they, Mayer?" snarled the lanky Mart Cullum.

"First mortgages on your two ranches. Then you get your guns. And then to hell with the pair av yez, and them five hundred dollar peace bonds!"

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JAKE GORE grabbed the pen first and signed his name. Mart Cullum put his brand on the other mortgage. Sheriff Bob Hale and Pat Patterson, at the saloonman's request, signed as witnesses.

Ian Mayer put the pen and ink on the back bar and shoved the signed mortgages into his safe. He unwrapped a package, and there was a beaming smile on his red face as he displayed the thousand dollar reward notice

Jason Millsap had given him to display. It was framed now and protected by glass.

The saloonman hung it on the wall above the rows of polished glasses and bottles on his back bar, then shoved out the bar bottle and glasses and two filled cartridge belts and holstered guns.

Mart Cullum and Jake Gore buckled on their guns. Sheriff Bob Hale told them to wait until they got out of town before they locked horns.

"And don't go gunnin' for Jason Millsap," he added flatly. "It'll be a waste of time. He's not in town."

They all had a drink. Pat Patterson eyed the framed reward notice. Sheriff Bob Hale was covertly watching him. Mart Cullum and Gore were lined up at the bar on either side of Pat and the law officer, like two savage dogs eager to get at one another. Ian Mayer polished an already spotless whiskey glass and held it up to the light.

"When my bartender comes on shift, Pat," he said, "I'll take you over to the house for supper. The missus an' Molly will be glad to set ye a plate and cup and saucer. 'Tis a long time now they ain't laid eyes on ye, lad."

"The button's comin' out to the ranch with me," said Mart Cullum. "He's workin' out that thousand dollar bail I put up and lost when he jumped it." There was an ugly tone to the big cowman's voice.

Pat's freckled face had reddened to the ears at the saloonkeeper's invitation and the mention of Molly Mayer. Now at Cullum's words the color drained from the young cowpuncher's face.

Pat felt humiliated and cheap and guilty. He hated big Mart Cullum right now as he had never begun to hate Jim Bender. Cullum was using him badly and he had to take it. The long-geared cowman was deliberately showing Pat up in a false light. Sheriff Bob Hale was eyeing him with fresh suspicion. And even the genial Ian Mayer was looking at him queerly.

But it was Jake Gore who really turned the trick.

"So that's which way the wind blows. Mart had to dig deep into the old sock to raise that bail money. And that long drawed out son don't do no man a good turn without he's gittin' paid back double with compounded int'rest. The kid shore scratched Cullum's back fer him when he lied fer 'im on the witness stand. But young Patterson kin suffer from a itchy back till hell's no more before Mart will turn aroun' and scratch him between the shoulders. Looks from where I'm a-standin' like Mart Cullum has hired hisself a chore boy. And Mart's chores is dirty."

Jake Gore stepped back from the bar and his hand was on his gun and his voice was a deep growl. "Jim Bender got dry-gulched. If ever my dead carcass gits found shot thataway, you'll know who done it. And that it taken Mart Cullum an' his hired hand both to git the job done. Mark that down in your law book, Hale."

Sheriff Bob Hale stepped between Jake Gore and Cullum. The easy drawl of his voice was gone and it was as sharp as a whetted knife. "Why don't you and Cullum git for home? Your pawin' and bellerin' gits wearisome after a while. The fresh air will blow the jail stink outa your clothes. Git along, Jake."

Jake Gore said he was as soon as he got a bottle, and before Mart Cullum and Pat Patterson pulled out. "So's they won't be layin' in the brush fer me, along the trail."

Ian Mayer handed Jake Gore a bottle. "That mortgage falls due the minute you bust the peace bond, Jake. Cullum's reads the same way. So unless you both want to lose your outfits, take it easy." The brogue was gone from the saloonman's voice. His eyes were cold as blue ice.

"Tell it to Mart Cullum," growled Jake Gore and walked out on his thick bowed legs, spurs jingling, the bottle in his hand.

Mart Cullum stood with his back against the bar and one boot heel hooked on the brass rail. His opaque black eyes watched the blocky cowman through the swinging half doors.

Pat Patterson looked at the framed reward notice. His slate gray eyes were dark with a brooding bitterness and his wide mouth was pulled into a hard, grim line. He spoke without taking his eyes from the reward dodger.

"So I'm the Number One prime suspect for Jim Bender's killin', am I, Sheriff? All right. . . . That's the kind of a hand your Law deals me. I'll play the cards you dealt me."

He nodded at the framed reward dodger. "No man ever needed that thousand bucks any worse than I do right now. Have it in green foldin' money, Sheriff. I'll be ridin' to town one of these times to collect, cash on the line. Jason Millsap's pet sayin'. And that's the way I want it."

Pat Patterson turned from the bar and hitched up his sagging cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter. His slate gray eyes were bleak and his grin was bitter.

"All right, Mart. I'm your hired man. Let's go."

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IT SEEMED to Pat Patterson that Life or Fate, or whatever you called it, had stacked the cards against him. He had no memory of his mother and his cowman father had been killed one stormy night when a beef herd

stampeded, and Pat had had to quit school and go to work. He was riding the JB rough string when Jim Bender made him that proposition about filing on a homestead.

Pat had just passed his twenty-first birthday when he filed on the land called the Clear Creek line-camp. Pat had wintered there the year before, feeding cattle and keeping water holes chopped open along the creek, and that Clear Creek camp was just about his cowpuncher dream come true. It was at the edge of the badlands where the blacktail deer bedded down in the buckbrush and the scrub pines grew. Giant cottonwoods shaded the log cabin and big log barn, and in the late spring there was the smell of wild roses. In the fall you could step out the back door and eat your fill of chokecherries and bright red buffalo berries after the first frost sweetened them.

There was a big fenced-in hay meadow where bluejoint and timothy brushed a man's stirrups, a big cattle shed with thatched willow roof. Mallard and teal ducks had nests down along the creek banks and the sagehens and prairie chickens took their cool shade there. In the early mornings and late evenings the deer and antelope came to water. And because Pat loved wild things and didn't own a rifle or shotgun, they became tame when they found out he wasn't going to harm them. Magpies hopped in and out of his cabin door and scolded him until he fed them bread chunks.

He worked with his string of broncs in the round corral and got them so gentle he hated to turn them over to the hard riding JB cowpunchers like Mart Cullum and Jake Gore. And when Jim Bender wanted him to file on the Clear Creek place, Pat jumped at the chance. He didn't want money. But he did want that string of broncs. And he wanted to keep the place he filed on.

"I'll just stay on here," he told Bender, "like I actually owned the place. I kin feed your cattle here, break horses for you, keep the place up. Later on, mebby, I could run a few head of cows. Have my own iron. I kin git a crew of 'breeds to help me put up the hay. That's all the help I'd need to run this little ranch like it should be run. I'll make you money thataway and it gives me somethin' to call my own. It's the only home I've had since I kin remember."

"Fine," Jim Bender had agreed. "It's a deal."

But big Jim Bender had had no intention of letting young Pat Patterson keep the place, or the string of gentled broncs. When the final deed came with the rest of the mail to the JB home ranch, Bender fetched it, a bill

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of sale and a quart of whiskey, to the Clear Creek camp.

But Pat Patterson did not take a drink from the proffered bottle. And he refused to sign the bill of sale or transfer the deed to Jim Bender.

"A couple of your JB cowpunchers was here yesterday," he told Jim Bender, "with an order signed by you. An order for that string of horses you said was mine."

"Some kind of a mistake," blustered the big cattleman.

"Yeah. I know it was a mistake. They told me they'd come a few days early. They should have waited till I signed this place over to you. It was a mistake all right. It's costin' you the Clear Crick ranch. I've decided to hang onto it. And I've hid out that string of horses where you can't find 'em, and none of your cowhands want to find 'em. This is my ranch, Mister Bender." Pat Patterson had shoved the deed to it into his pocket.

"You've been talking to Mart Cullum and Jake Gore! That pair of dirty crooks have poisoned your mind!"

"I've talked to Mart Cullum and Jake Gore. But they didn't poison my mind any. They just cleared away the cobwebs. I own the Clear Crick Ranch. I'm keepin' it."

"Why you double-crossing young whelp! I'll teach you a lesson you won't forget!"

Jim Bender was a big man but too paunchy and soft. He was a quart a day drinker, short winded and sluggish and clumsy. He charged like a bull and the bronc-rider had ducked and sidestepped and let the big man's wild swings fan the breeze until Jim Bender was puffing and dripping with sweat and wobbly. Then young Pat Patterson had ripped into him with cold and savage fury. He had the big cattleman's face smashed and ripped and pounded into a bloody pulp before he sank one deep into the heavy paunch. Then he had emptied the cartridges from Jim Bender's gun, kicked him onto his feet, and told him never to set foot again on the Clear Creek Ranch.

A week or two later Pat had ridden home from a visit to the badlands hideout where he had hidden his string of horses. There was a fresh beef hanging up and covered with a meat tarp. A JB hide on the fence. Bender and the stock inspector waiting there for him. The stock inspector showed Pat a bench warrant with his name on it.

Jim Bender told the stock inspector he'd like a word or two alone with young Patterson who had butchered a JB beef.

"I'll make a deal with you, Patterson. Swap that bench warrant for the deed to the Clear Creek Ranch."

"You still wear the marks of that last beatin', Bender. Want me to improve on the job?"

While Pat was in his cabin putting his toothbrush, shaving outfit and a clean shirt and socks in a sack to take along to jail, Pat had grinned flatly at the closed door. At the deep carved initials there. M.M. and P.P. Molly Mayer's initials were M.M. But she did not know they were carved on the door of the little log cabin at Pat Patterson's Clear Creek Ranch.

Those initials stood for a young cowpuncher's dreams. Dreams he'd never gotten up enough courage to put into words when he was with Ian Mayer's pretty black haired, blue eyed daughter Molly.

Pat had gone to jail. To his surprise, Mart Cullum had bailed him out before he had gotten used to being locked up.

"Us nesters has to stick together," was Cullum's explanation. "Me'n Jake Gore an' you kin deal that big land-grabber plenty misery. If we stick together."

They had stopped at the First and Last Chance. Mart Cullum wanted to get a bottle. Ian Mayer had shaken hands with Pat.

"I was gittin' the money together, lad, to bail ye out. But Mart Cullum beat me to it. I'll pay ye the thousand now, Cullen. And assume the responsibility av the Pat lad."

But Cullum had shaken his head. "Let 'er ride, Mayer. Us nesters got to hang together."

"Or hang separate, as the sayin' goes. I've talked to me lawyer. Pat Patterson was workin' fer Jim Bender. Whose beef is the lad going' to eat, then, if he don't eat JB meat. There's no case ag'in' the lad that'll hold water in court. And don't be draggin' young Pat into such shenanigans as you and Jake Gore is up to. The lad's as clean as a hound tooth. Don't go leadin' him off on the crooked trail you an' Jake Gore travels. I'm warnin' ye, Mart Cullum."

"The button don't need no whiskey advice from you, Mayer. Hell, he's free, white an' twenty-one. Me'n Jake Gore is just tormentin' Jim Bender some. That big bull needs proddin' where it hurts. Anyhow, it was Pat Patterson, not me'n Jake, that beat the hell outa Bender. Bender don't fergit a grudge. Young Pat Patterson is goin' to need me'n Jake Gore if he aims to live on at his Clear Crick place. Jim Bender fights dirty."

There was truth in what Mart Cullum said. Ian Mayer had to admit that Pat couldn't fight Bender's JB outfit alone. But the saloonman had been worried when he took the news home to his wife and Molly.

"The Pat lad is travelin' in tough company and no mistake. Say a bit av a prayer for the bye. I'll keep me fingers crossed and me eyes and ears open. He sent ye his love, Molly."

"That," blushed Molly, "he did not. He's so bashful he really suffers. I was sorry I got Bob Hale to let me into the hoosegow to see

him. Poor Pat. He nearly died of shame. His pride was hurt. And he's as proud as he is shy. And I nearly choked on my handkerchief when he called himself a jailbird. He'll never come to the house again."

"I'll fetch 'im," promised Ian Mayer, "if I have to tap him between the eyes with a bung-starter."

Then some JB cowpunchers had dropped by the Clear Creek Ranch and they had seemed friendly and eager to side Pat. They told him that Jim Bender and Jason Millsap who owned a half pardnership in the JB outfit, were going to railroad Pat Patterson back to the pen for keeps. And they had enough on Mart Cullum and Jake Gore to railroad that tough pair when the sign was right. And that had spooked Pat. He'd taken the story straight to Mart Cullum.

"If that's the way you feel about it, button," Mart Cullum had told him, "drag it. But don't quit the country. Hole up in the badlands where you got them horses cached out. Bob Hale won't want you bad enough to locate yuh there. You kin gimme the deed to your place to cover that thousand dollar bail."

"The deed is locked up in Ian Mayer's safe at the First and Last Chance. In a sealed envelope. And signed over to him in case anything happens to me. He'll pay you that thousand."

The lanky Mart Cullum had stood there on his long legs and for several minutes he cursed young Pat Patterson. And all the time he kept his big hairy hand on his gun and his opaque black eyes had glittered wickedly. Pat knew the lanky cowman was itching to gunwhip him if he opened his mouth. Pat had had to take that cussing.

"Git outa my sight," Mart Cullum had finally finished. "Hole up like I told yuh. Stay there till I need yuh. Rabbit on me and I'll track yuh down and I'll kill yuh where I cut your sign. Git!"

Mart Cullum had always wanted the Clear Creek Ranch. But Cullum knew better than to try to dicker with Ian Mayer for the deed that was locked up in the big safe at the First and Last Chance. And the saloonkeeper realized the futility of offering again to pay off Pat's debt to Cullum. . . .

* * *

Ian Mayer's heart was heavy when he went home. The best red-checked tablecloth was laid and the best chinaware and silver. Chicken was frying slowly on the stove. Molly had baked one of her deep apple pies.

"The lad's gone to his ranch. 'Tis the devil's own kettle av trouble he's into. It's eatin' his young heart, and that dirty Mart Cullum is up to no good as usual. If only Bob Hale had the sense to let Cullum and Jake Gore kill each other like the pair of wolves they are! But he's playin' his cards close to his belly, and nobody gittin' so much as a peek at his hole card.

"Bob Hale kin be the deep 'un when he takes the notion. But there was a look in the eye av young Pat Patterson that wasn't comical at all, at all. And me money is still on the bye. . . . And now have yerself a good cry, Molly. And leave the extra place set at the table. 'Tis Sheriff Bob Hale that'll be comin' to supper. And 'tis you, me coleen that might git that peep at the badge polisher's hole card. 'Tis fer the lad ye'll be doin' it."

CHAPTER THREE

Trouble at Round-Up Crossing

MART CULLUM was big and tough and ornery, but he knew when to let up riding a man. He had seen that hard glint in Pat Patterson's slate gray eyes and he knew that he had crowded the young bronc-rider to the limit. He had never seen Pat fight but he'd seen Jim Bender, more than once, clean out a saloonful of men in a rough and tumble scrap. And he'd seen Bender's battered face after Pat's fists had worked it over. Pat Patterson had taken just about all he figured on taking from Mart Cullum.

"I wouldn't let Sheriff Bob Hale worry me too much, button," the lanky cowman broke a long silence as they rode along together.

"What makes you think Bob's got me frettin'?" Pat cut his companion a hard, quick look from under his slanted hatbrim.

"About you bein' Jim Bender's killer."

"I didn't kill Jim Bender." It was a flat statement. And he followed it with a direct, blunt question. "Did you?"

"No."

"Then let the bushwhacker do the worryin'." And Pat dropped into another silence.

"I bin thinkin', button," Cullum grinned twistedly, "you might as well ride on to your own place on Clear Crick, till we git kinda organized. I'll have a job fer yuh in a few days. I'll let yuh know. Meanwhile, take 'er easy."

"I'm ridin' on to my place," Pat Patterson told Mart Cullum flatly. "I'm livin' there from now on. You got ten-twelve head of broncs that need breakin'. I'll turn 'em over to you gentle. At the regular price of ten dollars a head for the job. That'll mark off a hundred dollars on what I owe yuh. If you've got any ideas about me throwin' in with you on any rustlin', or if you think I'm doin' any part of your dirty chores like Jake Gore said, you better change your mind. I won't do any man's

dirty jobs. And don't never cuss me out again, Mart."

Pat was covertly watching the lanky cowman. If he tried to cuss Pat out as he'd done once before, the bronc-rider wasn't going to take it.

Mart Cullum shifted in his saddle and rode with his long weight in one stirrup, his eyes black and glittering as polished flint. Pat Patterson stared back into the lanky cowman's eyes without flinching. Then Mart Cullum grinned faintly and pulled a quart bottle from the pocket of his chaps.

"You don't need to git on the prod, button." He pulled the cork on the bottle and handed it towards Pat.

Pat Patterson shook his head. "I don't like the booze that much."

"I'd as soon drink alone," Cullum told him.

That settled it. Men like Mart Cullum abided by such rules. To refuse a drink from a man's bottle amounted to an insult, according to Cullum's lights, and that was just the way Pat wanted it. They were enemies and any words either of them said would not alter that break one way or the other.

They rode on for a mile or two, the silence between them heavy and strained and awkward. It was a long ways to where their trails forked and the distance was much too far to travel together.

Finally Mart Cullum pulled his bottle again and took a long pull. "I'll have ten head of broncs in my corral day after tomorrow mornin'," he said curtly, "Come fer 'em early. Don't let 'em stand there penned up all day without feed er water. I want 'em rope broke an' slicker broke an' hobble broke. Ten bucks a head. After that I got about fifteen miles of drift fence fer yuh to put up. I'll furnish the posts an' wire. Take it at ten cents a post hole an' the holes three foot deep, or straight forty a month. When you git done with the fence there's the big shed to clean. I'll furnish team and a slip scraper. I'm on a dicker to winter a band of sheep fer that Swede sheepman the other side of Jake Gore's place. You'll finish out the winter herdin' sheep. So-long, button. Pick them broncs up at sunrise."

Mart Cullum rode off at a long lope. Pat grinned flatly as he watched the lanky cowman out of sight. Then he swung off and away from the wagon road and cut across the hills in a straight line for his Clear Creek Ranch. If Jake Gore or Mart Cullum bushed up somewhere along the road to dry-gulch him, they'd have a long wait.

Cullum's last word, his crude way of making Pat feel like a cheap hired man, had been almost comical. It was a twenty-five mile ride from the Clear Creek Ranch to Cullum's place at Coyote Springs. To reach there by sunrise meant getting up plenty early this time of the year. Just another typical Mart Cullum touch. Then fence building and cattle shed cleaning and finally the despised sheepherder job. Cullum was really pouring it on. Pat wondered how long before he could ever enjoy a hearty laugh about anything.

Sundown, twilight, then the moon rose and Pat Patterson rode with his head in the stars again. Because he was a lot younger than he sometimes figured he was and dreams came easy. But he rode cautiously when he neared the little ranch at the head of Clear Creek.

Mebbyso Cullum and Gore hadn't dry-gulched Jim Bender, but they had intended to do that kind of a bushwhacker job on the big bulldozing, land grabbing cattleman. And if they hated Pat Patterson bad enough to kill him, either of them would do their shooting from ambush. That was their way.

One thing was sure: Neither knew where Pat had been that moonlight night when somebody had dry-gulched Jim Bender. Not even Sheriff Bob Hale suspected that Pat had heard the shots and had seen the lone killer ride away. And Pat had been the first man to ride up on Bender's bullet-torn body. He had gotten only a brief glimpse of the bushwhacker riding away from there and into the night.

Pat had left Cullum's place after supper, after Mart had saddled a horse and said he was riding over to have a medicine talk with Jake Gore. Pat had saddled his horse and headed for Long Coulee to give himself up to the law. Because there had been something about Mart Cullum's furtive manner that had roused the young bronc-rider's suspicions.

But finding Jim Bender murdered had changed Pat's mind about giving himself up. He had ridden back to Cullum's place and waited. Mart had been more than half drunk when he got back before daybreak. More than half drunk and too wrapped up in his own whiskey thoughts to notice that Pat's horse had been ridden hard. He'd found Pat apparently asleep in the bunkhouse.

"If anybody asks you, button," Mart Cullum had said when Pat was cooking breakfast that morning, "I bin here all night. Ain't left the ranch."

Pat wished he'd gotten a better look at the bushwhacker. It could have been Mart Cullum or Jake Gore, or any one of Jim Bender's many bitter enemies. Cullum and Gore weren't the only tough hombres who had hated big Jim Bender bad enough to kill him.

"If I could sight that rider again," Pat told himself now as he neared his Clear Creek Ranch, "in the moonlight, I'd know 'im by the way he rode. . . ."

Pat Patterson jerked erect in his saddle, then stood in his stirrups and stared, and the blood pounding into his throat choked him.

He had topped the ridge that looked down on his little ranch and was staring at a big bonfire down below where his cabin and barn and shed and corrals showed dimly in the moonlight. Then he jerked his gun and spurred down the long slope at a reckless run. It wasn't a bonfire. It was one of his last year's haystacks near the big cattle shed that was on fire.

He was halfway down the ridge when he sighted the lone rider. The man was headed away from the blazing haystack and riding like the Devil was chasing him.

★

PAT let out a wild yell and emptied his six-shooter at the fleeing rider. But the range was far too long and Pat pulled up. Until horse and rider were out of sight Pat Patterson stared, studying everything about the man and horse that would help him remember and identify him. And this much he knew. That it was the same lone rider who had dry-gulched Jim Bender.

"I know yuh! Damn your black heart, I'll know yuh if ever I see yuh a-horseback. Yuh wing flappin' buzzard!"

That was it. The rider's elbows stuck out as he rode. And they flapped up and down like the wings of a big bird taking off.

Mart Cullum never flapped his arms like that. Neither did Jake Gore. Nor any other cowhand or rancher around here that Pat had ever worked with.

Then Pat crowded his horse on down the slant and from then on until daybreak he worked with one man's desperate strength to save his ranch from being burned out.

The dry hay burned like tinder, where it had been forked loose. And the heat was unbearable. But when the loose hay had burned out and the blaze was eating at the hard packed body of the stack, he had more of a chance. He fought it with wet sacks and dirt, so that he kept the fire from jumping to the shed roof or the other haystacks. It was the best that one man could do.

When dawn broke, Pat had the fire licked. He had lost that one stack of hay but that was all. His clothes were scorched and burned, his hair and eyebrows singed and his hide was hot like it had been baked. He was black and sweat-streaked and limp from exhaustion. But he had saved his little ranch.

If he had been an hour or even half an hour later, that fire would have wiped out every building and corral and his other haystacks. His Clear Creek Ranch would have been burned out.

Another thing penetrated his weary brain. For at least an hour or more the blaze had been big enough to be sighted ten miles away. And Jake Gore's place was no further than that. Jake had left town not more than half an hour ahead of Pat and Mart Cullum. He must have sighted the blaze. But he had not ridden over to help fight the fire.

Mart Cullum had been riding the ridges somewhere ahead of Pat. If Mart had kept on the wagon road or even if he cut across country, his trail home would take him within five miles of the Clear Creek Ranch. And so unless Cullum had swung way around, which wasn't likely, he also must have sighted the fire here. And he too had stayed away.

So it looked like both those tough, ornery cowmen had violated one great unwritten law of the cow country: that when a man sights a fire, even though it is blazing on land belonging to an enemy, he comes to help fight it.

Ugly-tempered and surly as Jake Gore was, it didn't seem to Pat Patterson that Jake would refuse to ride here to fight fire.

And while he and Mart Cullum had parted on an unfriendly basis, it wasn't like the lanky Mart to ride away from a fire fighting job.

Pat peeled off his ruined clothes and soaked in the cold creek. Then he made himself a pot of strong coffee and cooked breakfast. He wolfed his grub and washed it down with the coffee.

Then, weary as he was, he rode down into the pasture and caught and saddled a fresh horse. And headed for Jake Gore's place.

SNAKE CREEK divided Pat Patterson's little range and the land Jake Gore claimed. It was about five miles from either ranch and made a natural boundary be-

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tween the two little places. Tall cottonwoods marked it from a distance, and when you got closer you sighted the willows and buckbrush along the banks.

On either side of the creek were low rolling hills. The round-up trail crossed the creek at one of the few and far between gravel crossings where a saddle horse or a team and wagon would not bog down. Because Snake Creek was treacherous and boggy for the most part.

The sun was rising when Pat Patterson, riding at a long trot, reached the round-up crossing on Snake Creek. And when he sighted a saddled horse grazing, bridle reins dragging, he reined up and slid his six-shooter from its holster. He recognized that big, bald-faced bay horse as one of Jake Gore's small remuda. Then he saw Jake sprawled there on the ground, face down in the middle of the dim road.

And before he got much closer he knew that Jake Gore was dead.

Pat's horse spooked a little but he finally coaxed and spurred the snorting gelding up to where the dead man lay on the ground. Pat leaned across his saddle horn and stared down into the dead man's face.

Jake's eyes were open and glazed by death. Quite a lot of blood had spilled from his gaping mouth.

As near as Pat Patterson could tell without dismounting there were two or three bullet holes in the dead man's shirt under his shoulders and above the waistband of his worn overalls.

Jake Gore had been shot in the back from the heavy brush that grew along both banks of the creek. Somebody had bushwhacked Jake Gore last night. And it seemed mighty likely that Jake had sighted the fire at the Clear Creek Ranch and had been on his way to help when he had been murdered.

"So you come back to look your job over by daylight, eh, button?"

It was Mart Cullum's nasal, rasping voice, and it came from the heavy brush along the creek.

Pat Patterson jerked erect in his saddle. He still had his gun in his hand. But he could not see Mart Cullum or his horse. And the lanky cowman was not coming out from behind the brush.

"I'm goin' to gut-shoot yuh directly, button. Jake Gore was my wolf meat. Nobody but me had the right to kill that damned double-crossin' Jake. It wasn't your cut-in. And the dirty sneakin' way yuh done it! Settin' fire to an ol' haystack so's me'n Jake would sight the blaze an' ride to help yuh fight fire! And then yuh laid here in the brush an' bushwhacked Jake. You sneakin' young whelp! Damn yuh, don't deny it!

"You'd a got me, too, only I heard the shootin'. So left my horse down the crick a ways an' come on afoot. And there was Jake's horse. And there was Jake, shot to hell, still bleedin' and deader'n a dead dog. But you'd gone back to fight that haystack fire to keep 'er from spreadin'. When I made certain nobody was bushed up here, I rode on to your place. Set on a knoll an' watched yuh fight fire. An' come daylight an' you ketched a fresh horse, I knowed what you was up to. So I beat yuh back here an' ketched yuh in your own trap, button.

"You knowed I aimed to kill yuh when I rode away from yuh, or if I didn't, Jake Gore would. This country had growed too small fer the three of us. Me'n Jake had 'er made to kill Jim Bender an' lay the killin' on you. We'd a had a story built that woulda hung yuh, only they separated me'n Jake afore we could git the medicine made. That's why I went your bail an' kept yuh hid out. We had to kill Jim Bender. And we had to have somebody to lay it on.

"It was that damn Ian Mayer that told Sheriff Bob Hale to lock me'n Jake in sep'rate cells so's we couldn't build us a story. And the hell of it was me'n Jake *didn't* kill Jim Bender. You beat us to it that night. Clear as glass now. You killed Bender. Jake knowed it. Even that slow motion Sheriff Bob Hale was gittin' onto yuh.

"So yuh had to kill Jake Gore. And you fixed it so's I'd git blamed fer Jake's killin'. You was on your way to town to have me arrested fer killin' Jake Gore. . . . Now just set there an' listen to me cuss yuh out, button. When yuh can't stand it no more, start shootin' into the brush. And I'll give you what you give Jake."

Pat's voice was harsh as he said, "I didn't kill Jim Bender. I didn't kill Jake Gore. But I sighted the man that did it. I'll know 'im when I sight 'im a-horseback. You're drunk, Mart. You got it all wrong. Listen—"

"Shut up, yuh snivelin', coyote whelp! You ain't beggin' off thataway. I'm onto you an' that shanty Irish saloonkeeper. Mayer's got my place an' Jake Gore's. He's got yourn in his safe. Whoever marries that girl of his gits the whole spread. That's Mayer's slick game. And here's somethin' you kin take to Hell with yuh, button: It's Sheriff Bob Hale that'll git Molly Mayer. Yeah. Slow Motion Bob that's playin' his cards close to 'is belly. Bob Hale rakes in the big jackpot and the girl. . . ." Mart Cullum's laugh was harsh and brittle.

"I seen them purty initials you carved on your cabin door, button—hern and yourn. Shore sweet an' purty. Mebbyso that saloonkeeper's daughter slipped off and come there to he'p yuh whittle on the door."

Pat Patterson's temper snapped. He jumped his horse straight at the brush and he was jerked sideways in his saddle as a .30-30 bullet hit him in the shoulder. Then his horse was lunging through the heavy brush, and Mart Cullum had dropped his carbine and yanked his six-shooter as Pat sighted him and began shooting.

Pat's badly spooked horse almost knocked the lanky cowman down as another bullet ripped Pat's thigh, but he kept on shooting. Mart Cullum was cursing as he swayed on his long legs.

Then Cullum dropped when a .45 slug hit him in the mouth.

Pat Patterson was riding one of the JB broncs that he'd brought out of the badlands after Bender's death, and the big four-year-old gelding was badly scared by the gunfire. By the time Pat got his horse calmed down, he had lost a lot of blood and felt dizzy and sick from pain. He was bleeding a lot by the time he finally got his horse talked into standing still and he was able to swing from his saddle.

Mart Cullum was dead all right. Pat stood there hipshot, his weight on his good leg, and stared down at the dead cowman. He ejected the six empty shells from his six-shooter and reloaded his gun. He didn't remember firing that many shots, but it had taken all those bullets to finally kill the big, tough, ornery Cullum.

Then Pat's horse lifted its head and cocked both ears forward and nickered. Pat swayed a little on his wounded leg as he turned his head to look around.

Two riders were coming along the round-up road, traveling at a long lope and one of them was about fifty feet in the lead. The horseback er in the lead was Sheriff Bob Hale and he had a gun in his hand, and was standing in his stirrups. The rider behind the law officer was Jason Cash-on-the-Line Millsap.

"Take 'er easy, Pat!" called Sheriff Bob Hale. "Drop your gun. Looks like you killed a man or two and I gotta go through the motions of arrestin' yuh."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Hired Hand Makes His Play

THERE was a quivering, empty feeling inside Pat Patterson's belly. The butt of his six-shooter felt wet and slippery in his hand, but he did not drop it.

Jason Millsap had ridden up. His eyes were pale gray and cold and there was a faint smile on his lean, gray skinned face.

"Caught the young killer red-handed this time, Sheriff. Watch his gun, man! He's desperate!"

"A night rider," Pat Patterson measured each word slowly, "that sets haystacks afire an' springs bushwhacker traps, should always ride a dark colored horse. Not a gray horse like that 'un you're forkin', Millsap. And you'd orter wear some kinda riggin' to keep them buzzard wings of yourn from flappin' when your horse hits a lope or a run.

"I sighted you the night you dry-gulched Jim Bender. Sighted you for the second time last night when you rode away from my haystack that you'd set afire. . . . I was wrong when I told Mart Cullum I wouldn't do no man's dirty chores. I just did an ugly job for you, Jason Millsap, when I killed Mart Cullum."

"The young fool's gone crazy, Sheriff." Jason Millsap's voice was harsh. "He's a mad-dog killer. He's got a gun and he'll use it on me if you don't protect me. I'm unarmed. Kill him, Hale! You're the Law!"

Pat Patterson's brain was reeling. Another minute and he'd drop, go out like a light. His lips pulled away from his gritting teeth.

"You're in the road, Sheriff," Pat's voice came faint in his own ears. "Millsap's hidin' behind yuh. Ride outa the way."

"Jason Millsap never packs a gun," drawled Sheriff Bob Hale. "You hadn't oughta shoot a man that ain't heeled."

Sheriff Bob Hale's horse shied off sideways and out of line from between Jason Millsap and Pat Patterson's gun.

Millsap's right hand moved swiftly under his corduroy coat. It came out gripping a long-barreled gun he'd slid with practiced speed from a hidden shoulder holster.

Pat Patterson had overplayed his hand. His eyes were blinded by nausea and black dizziness. His wounded leg gave way under his weight and he toppled sideways. He heard a gun go off and saw a streak of flame and the noise of gunfire dinned in his ears. Then he was down on his hands and knees and his gun had slid from his slippery grip. He picked it up from the ground but hadn't strength enough to lift it.

Anyhow, there was nobody to shoot at. Millsap's big gray horse was lunging and tangled in the buckbrush with an empty saddle. And Jason Millsap lay on the ground cursing, blood spilling out of his mouth.

Sheriff Bob Hale kicked the long-barreled .38 Special target gun from Millsap's hand and squatted on his hunkers beside the wounded banker.

"You're dyin', Millsap," Sheriff Bob Hale drawled. "You might as well come clean before yuh kick the bucket. What made you kill Jim Bender?"

"Bender dug up my back trail. He found out I was an escaped convict from Florida. He was going to blackmail me—bleed me

white. So I killed him. He wasn't the first man I'd killed."

"You set fire to Patterson's haystack. Why?" Sheriff Bob Hale's slow voice had a sledge-hammer pound to it. Slow, heavy and merciless.

"So he'd blame it on Jake Gore, or Cullum. So the three of them would kill one another off. I'd get their outfits like I got Jim Bender's. . . . I was headed back for the JB ranch when I heard a rider coming fast. I rode into the brush. It was Jake Gore. He was headed for the fire. I hated Gore. He made an easy target. So I killed him."

"How about that old prison record?"

"I was cashier in a big Florida bank. I stole over a hundred thousand and hid it before I was caught. Pleaded guilty, hoping for a light sentence, but the judge threw the book at me. Florida prison road gang. I used the sledge hammer on the guard. Shot off the lock that fastened my leg to the ball. The bullet glanced off and wounded me in the leg. Near lost my foot. Left me lame for life.

"I laid low, lifted my money cache, changed my name. Came to the jerkwater town of Long Coulee and opened a bank. I was doing fine until Jim Bender somehow found me out. And I had to kill him. My luck backfired. I should have stuck to the big cities where I belong. . . ."

Jason Cash-on-the-Line Millsap coughed. The cough ended in a death rattle.

Sheriff Bob Hale got to his feet and walked over to where Pat Patterson was trying to sit up without falling over sideways.

"Take 'er easy, Pat. You're bleedin' like a stuck beef. Better lay back now. It's all over."

He opened the long, whetted blade of his jackknife and began cutting away Pat's shirt. He got both the shoulder and leg wounds bandaged and moved Pat to the edge of the creek where he could bathe his head and face in the cool water and drink his fill. Then he found Mart Cullum's bottle and fed Pat whiskey. He rolled and lit a cigarette and shoved it in the corner of Pat's mouth.

"I shouldn't be doin' all this for the feller that beat my time with Molly Mayer," Sheriff Bob Hale grinned his slow, easy grin.

"There's that red-headed schoolmarm at Long Coulee, Bob."

"She kinda likes me, too. But she can't build the dried apple pie that Molly turns out. I'll have to learn her to cook, I reckon."

"You was onto Jason Millsap," said Pat, "all along."

"Only halfways. He always was claimin' he never owned a gun. I cold-trailed him one evenin' when he'd taken one of his constitutional horseback rides. Sighted him target practicin'. I never went close enough fer him to sight me. When he'd rode back to town I moseyed over to where he'd bin targetin'.

"There was a lot of .38 Special shells on the ground. And at fifty yards he'd put every bullet into a tree trunk and my spread hand covered every bullet hole. . . . And two of the bullets I dug outa Jim Bender's dead carcass had come from such empty .38 Special shells. . . ."

"You kept almighty quiet about it, Bob. Lettin' Mart Cullum an' Jake Gore stand trial and all. Gittin' me in a sweat."

"I didn't have enough on ol' Cash-on-the-Line to make a conviction stick. Anyhow nobody give a damn much if Cullum an' Gore killed one another—good riddance of a pair of rustlers. You give me some worry. I come damn near throwin' you in the hoosegow to keep you safe on ice. But I figgered you'd want to play your own string out. And on account of Molly you wouldn't thank me none for ridin' herd on you like you was too harmless to take your own part. So I let yuh rock along."

"How come you was with Jason Millsap now?"

"Ol' Cash-on-the-Line had pulled out for the JB ranch when the Law turned Cullum an' Gore loose under them two-bit peace bonds. So after supper with Ian Mayer an' his good missus an' Molly last evenin' I slipped outa town an' cold-trailed Millsap. He wasn't at the JB home ranch when I got there, but he showed up after midnight.

"His gray horse was rode down and his clothes smelt of burnt hay. He looked kinda upset an' uneasy when he found me waitin' at the barn. His story was sorta mixed up in places. He said he'd heard shootin' somewhere near the round-up crossin' on Snake Crick. So I fetched him along on another JB gray horse. . . . And when we got here I just let you and him auger it out.

"I was ready when he made his gun-play. I'd never shot a man, and I hated to shoot Jason Millsap. But he was the kind of a man you had to shore kill before he done the killin'. I ain't happy about it. But on the other hand, I ain't gonna grieve about it. . . . Mebbyso you savvy how a man feels, Pat."

Pat Patterson cut a look in the direction of Mart Cullum's dead body. Then he looked at Sheriff Bob Hale and nodded.

"Mart crowded me thataway. I savvy, Bob."

They took a drink from Cullum's bottle. When they heard the rattle of buckboard wheels and the thud of shod hoofs and the sounds of voices, Sheriff Bob Hale nodded and grinned and got to his feet.

"That'll be Ian Mayer an' Doc in Doc's buckboard. I reckon Molly will be the one a-horseback. . . . You're gonna have hell, pardner, keepin' ary secrets from Molly when

you're married. So I told Mayer that the trout was bitin' good at your Clear Crick place if him an' Doc felt like wettin' a fishline. You kin ride to town in the buckboard. I'll send a wagon from the JB ranch to pick up the three dead customers. . . . I look for somebody to pick up the JB outfit mighty reasonable at the sheriff's sale. As low as a thousand dollars down will be high bid. I'll have that reward money in green foldin' stuff and ready for you like you said, Pat, the next time you walk into the First and Last Chance."

"No you don't, Bob. It's yours. And you saved my life when you taken the man that dry-gulched Jim Bender."

"It was you that had the goods on Millsap, Pat. Without you forcin' the showdown, he'd never have tipped his hole card."

Then he saw the stubborn look in Pat Patterson's eyes and grinned slowly.

"Then we'll split it, Pat. Pool the reward money and lay it on the barrelhead as down payment on the JB outfit. That makes us pardners. Ian Mayer will give you the Cullum and Gore outfits for a weddin' present. Between us we'll own the big old JB spread. And if you don't ask Molly Mayer to marry you when she rides up, I'll bend a gun barrel between your horns, and marry the girl myself."

"Just put up your gun, Bob. And ride to meet Doc and Ian Mayer. I'm just about in shape from Cullen's likker to tell Molly I whittled her initials along with mine on my cabin door. But now that we're pardners you might do a man a good turn and kinda warn her what's comin'. . . ."

"Do your own sparkin'. That ain't in the pardnership," grinned Sheriff Bob Hale, and he swung into his saddle.

"Then you're on your own when you tackle the red-headed schoolmarm. I could mebbyso put in a good word for yuh there. . . ."

"Folks call me Slow Motion," Sheriff Bob Hale grinned back at Pat as he rode to meet the buckboard, "but I somehow manage to git around to what I'm after. I dropped by the little schoolmarm's house last evenin', filled to the ears on Molly Mayer's cookin', with my law badge shinin' bright. She promised to be Missus Bob Hale when I take off my badge. That checked the bet to me. Ketch!"

The shining nickel-plated badge came sailing through the air and landed on the ground beside Pat Patterson. Pat was holding it in his hand when Molly Mayer slid her horse to a halt and swung from her saddle. Then she was on her knees beside Pat and her arms around his neck. There were tears in her eyes and a shaky, husky sobbing laugh in her throat.

"They told me," she whispered, "I'd have to play like it was leap year or I'd die an old maid!"

"Who told yuh that darn nonsense?"

"Dad and Bob Hale. What's that in your hand? It's sticking me in the back."

"Oh. It's Sheriff Bob Hale's law badge. His girl made him throw it away. Know somethin'? That pardner of mine is goin' to lead a henpecked life!"

THE END

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★

Should those greenhorn covered wagon immigrants accept as their leader the notorious killer, Captain Phil Buchanan, whose grim trail stretched a thousand red miles, from war-torn Virginia to the bloodstained frontier wilderness?

★

CHAPTER ONE

Devil on Horseback!

THE dark wind splurged buckets of icy spring rain on the tall, gaunt rider in dripping black. That night in '66 the wheel-rutted old road was a small, but turbulent river as it twisted down the timbered ridge, close to the Ohio River.

Phil Buchanan might have found shelter in a number of places before the stormy night let down on him, his wall-eyed pack-mule and his shiny-black thoroughbred. But during

IN BUCKSKIN ★ ★

Vigorous Wagon-Train Novel

these dangerous times just after the war, any road in the South was safer at night. Robbers, thieves and murderers infested most of them from end to end. Chicamauga Ridge, the thoroughbred, would be a grand prize for any of them, to say nothing of the Buckeye mule, the gold and other valuables Buchanan was packing. In addition, the ten thousand dollar dead-or-alive reward in good Yankee gold on a former Rebel captain's head would tempt any night-traveling thief or murderer.

They wanted him very badly back there in Virginia and would no doubt hound him to hell and gone to try to bring him back to the rope that was waiting to stretch his neck. It had been only eleven days ago since he had shot it out with them in the drawing room and on the front porch of Red Oak Hall, the once-palatial old house that had belonged to the Buchanans for two hundred years. It had

been anything but pretty, with four of them dead in the great hall, the sheriff and a deputy down on the porch, a seventh pitched out on his face on the front steps—and the whole infernal countryside gone crazy in the thundering roll of the gunfire from the staid and sober old mansion.

Red hell had blown up its storm in Phil Buchanan's brain that late afternoon. Drunken soldiers had made the former slaves dig up the gardens at pistol-point. Many of the walls inside had been ripped out with axes. Even the hearths of the old fire-places had been uprooted in the mad search for loot, and many a thieving dog had ridden away with his saddle loaded.

The war had been fought and lost, everybody knew now how and why and by whom it had been pushed upon the people, but history, as it was written, would never tell a tenth of the truth of it.

Lincoln was dead, and President Andrew Jackson would be given damned little credit for his pains to knock some sanity into the thick skulls of Washington who wanted now to take away all the lands of the vanquished. They were, indeed, introducing bills in the House to turn over the former owners of the lands to the former slaves, thus reviving slavery and making the war more of a grisley farce than ever.

Small wonder that the country was overrun with men like those apes who had died so suddenly back there. Abe Seigler, the sheriff, had been an infernal prison-whipping boss before the Carpetbaggers came down, their beady eyes gleaming, sharp noses forever poking.

Jake Light, deputy, had been a fourth-grade moonshiner. The others were not a flea jump above the varmints whose sole occupations had been fishing and stealing, with never an honest day's work out of them. They were dead now—and a blessing to the country!

Phil Buchanan was only one of the homeless thousands trying to get out of the country and make a new start elsewhere. He would not be safe from arrest until the Mississippi River was far behind him. Once inside Montana Territory he would settle down in one of the new frontier towns. Hundreds just like him were already out there, and he would be too far away to bring back, although enemies would be almost certain to follow him. But the West was wide and wild, not yet quite safe enough for the law to move in with all its usual high-handedness.

Lost in his thoughts at the moment, he was not prepared for the sudden yells, the sharp scream and the vicious barking of a burst of revolver shots that came to him out of the darkness and wind in his face.

THE rain had hidden it all until he was almost upon it. To his left now, in a rock and tree-walled little flat forty feet off the side of the road, a fire seemed to spring into being under the overhang of a low bench of cliffs that sheltered the flames from the wind and the rain. In the wabbly light two shaggy-looking old covered wagons stood out, tall and long and sway-backed. Surrounding the wagons, reeling on their feet were a dozen drunken white and black louts shouting and cursing at the tops of their voices.

"Hit ground! Hit ground!" The evident leader, a black-bearded brute of a man, was yelling. "Outer yer wagons with yer hands held high! Out, damn ye, *out!* We be the Road Riders, an' it's yer gold an' yer goods we want! Show fight, b'Gawd, an' ye're all dead men an' wimmin!"

Buchanan had seen mobs like this in any number of places since the end of the war. During all the fighting between the North and South these whites had been the hide-outs, the stay-at-home freebooters robbing, stealing and burning even then. Now they could come into the open, robbing and bullying and killing almost at will, while the Carpet-baggers and the turncoats—themselves looting the country—protected them in their wild break-loose. Sudden terror and the fear of quick harm to their own worthless hides and thick skulls to these brutes of humanity were the only laws they would ever thoroughly understand, and Buchanan plunged into his act to carry it out.

"Surround them, men!" he yelled, plunging his horse forward with a crash into the brush, his Navy .36's suddenly blazing. "Swing out troopers, and shoot them down! Halt!"

Buckeye brayed like a fool, adding more hellish noise to the din. All the brazen wretches in front of Buchanan except the black-bearded leader wheeled at once, as if a troop of Rebel cavalry had come back to life and was suddenly falling upon them. Just beyond the wagons there was another series of low bluffs dropping away down through the trees, thickets of briars and tall rocks. They went over bluffs, half of them heels above their heads, falling, stumbling and shrieking out in the darkness.

The leader hesitated. There were four bay mules, a good-looking saddle horse and a white-faced little red cow standing beyond him. Horse and mules were piled high with bundles, boxes and satchels of loot gathered somewhere else in the night's raiding. The cow—probably a good milk-giver—had been brought along as a part of the haul.

The black-beard started toward them, and then wheeled to open fire on the darkness in the direction of Buchanan, who poured three balls of lead into the black-beard, pitching

him dead and face-forward in a muddy puddle. The man's companions stormed on in their frantic flight down the bluffs and scattered as wild beast fleeing death in a deep, dark hollow below.

"Lawd! Lawd!" groaned an aged Negro down on his knees behind the rear wagon with his face uplifted to the rain. "De debbil himself's done come on hossback! Don't shoot ol' Mose; de Lawd knows I ain't nevah hurt a hair on nobody's haid!"

★

BUCHANAN slid off his saddle, long, glistening black cape sending the water flying as he gave his broad shoulders a sling. "Uncle," he said, "I haven't the faintest notion in the world of shooting you."

The old Negro slowly arose with his broad palms lifted, and Buchanan could see now that the rim of fuzzy wool around his bald black head was as white as cotton. "We ain't done nothin' to you-all. We's jes' peaceful folks—"

"Mind your manners, Mose!" ordered a girl's voice from the forward wagon. "He has said that he doesn't intend to harm you. I like that man's voice—and the way he can shoot!"

A tall girl with a red raincape whipped around her flounced down over the high seat and front wheel. "We thank you for coming," she added before the surprised Buchanan could speak. "Keep your hat on. No gentleman would think of baring his head in this awful downpour."

"Good evening, sir." A tall man with a barrel-like chest and a mattress of red beard dropped out of the rear of the wagon. "I am Samuel Matthorn, from the Blue Ridge country, a miller by trade and a minister of the gospel by God's calling. The young lady with the ready lip is Susan Adair, my step-daughter. Her mother's in the wagon, where a woman belongs in the dead of night. You and your men seem to have killed the poor, misguided man lying there in the mud. May God have mercy on your souls."

"And keep your powder dry and your aim good!" shot in the girl.

"Niki!" The man whirled upon her with sudden fire in his eyes. "Back in the wagon, consarn it, with your mother! I will tolerate none of your loose tongue tonight!"

The girl retired but not without a bantering flash from her own eyes. By this time a big, round black woman of sixty with all the whites of her eyes showing had virtually dumped herself out of the rear wagon to the left of old Mose. She looked Buchanan up and down slowly, studying him from the toes of his wet boots to the top of his wide-brimmed old black hat.

"When a gennelman comes, wet or dry, Massa Sammy," she intoned, "then this ol' Mammy Grundy knows 'im. This be one."

"An' that be the truth," nodded old Mose in agreement.

It was the fall-in with people who might become friends, and yet there was something in Samuel Matthorn that Buchanan did not like. He tried to blame it on the mean black night, but it was something more than that.

Matthorn knew the danger of the robbers returning, and he knew that they now had to get away from the spot as quickly as they could, yet he acted as if he had all the time in the world and drove old Mose Grundy and his wife across the road to find their four yokes of big red oxen.

Things were not helped when they were ready to roll. Old Mose, his wife and the girl had yoked in the oxen and gathered up the few iron pots and pans near the fire. Matthorn seemed just a little too high and mighty to turn his hand. He did not want to touch the loot-laden horse, the four mules and the white-faced little cow, and yet the girl, seemingly more wide-awake than any of them, said the robbers had come up the road with them.

It fell to Buchanan's lot to take care of the mules, the horse and the cow. He trailed old Mose's big, lumbering wagon, and at the end of a couple of miles they came upon two smaller covered wagons on the roadside where a fire had been kindled under the trees and everything was still in a state of intense excitement.

Again a sneaky little feeling of disappointment trickled through Captain Phil Buchanan. The mules, the cow and the horse belonged to a little group who called themselves "the Fisher folks."

Jasper Fisher was the father, long and lean, almost cadaverous-faced. He had two sons, Ashur and Henny, as long and lean as himself and buck-toothed. The mother was like a scrawny crow flapping about from one wagon to another. Buchanan heard Jasper Fisher call her Dubby. Then a gangling red-haired girl appeared. It was a wonder to Buchanan why none of them had even tried to put up a fight.

"We passed the other folks' camp just afore nightfall," explained the woman. "We moughta camped near 'em, but they looked like quality folkses to us, an' we're just what's called plain ridge-runners whar we come from."

She did not need to tell Buchanan that. It was written all over them. He heard the girl called Sugar. She looked at him and grinned a number of times. He got away as quickly as he could, following the Matthorn wagons on down the sloppy road. Before long the Fishers were catching up with them, their stout mules being faster than Matthorn's oxen. When

their chance came they hastily drove ahead and splashed on around a hill.

Buchanan thought the girl had gone on with them until she came up out of the darkness and fell in beside him.

"Pa an' ma ain't no hands to mix," she grinned at him in a faint show of light coming from the dark sky. "They ain't just unperlite, you see, Mr.—uh—what did you call yourself?"

"Smith," he lied.

"I like Smith." The girl giggled. "It's so nice an' common, just as easy as Rover or Fido, ain't it? The young men back home used to call me Pussy Willow. Would you care if I called you Calvey, Mr. Smith?"

"Why—why, no," he frowned. "But aren't you afraid of losing your wagons in this dark?"

"I see good as a cat in the dark." She giggled again. "Bet you don't know that I know you've got nice gray eyes? You ain't thirty years old yet. Your hair's kinda brown an' wavy, too, Calvey. I like men with brown hair an' wavy gray eyes. Don't that make you just want to bust out laughin'? 'Wavy gray eyes,' I said. Ma 'most dies alaughin'—sometimes. Don't that jar you plumb top an' bottom, Calvey?"

"No, it doesn't," he frowned. "I'm thinking about your wagons. If they turn off the road—"

"Pa an' ma," she cut in quickly, "would know I'd catch up. I've been out in the dark before."

She stiffened in her saddle when he did not answer. The moon was riding high above the clearing storm, and for a brief moment, Sugar Fisher seemed to jump boldly out into a spotlight, then the darkness abruptly swallowed her again.

In that moment Phil Buchanan, who had ridden through blood and gunfire on a dozen battlefields, was startled. Sugar Fisher had been something more than a crack-brained little white-trash ridge-runner. The light had given her something poverty had denied her, showing her eyes as bright and green as emeralds, and the halo-like turning her into the one ravishing beauty a man might see in all his lifetime.

"I'm—sorry." Her voice was like a sob as she suddenly spurred her horse. "Good-bye, Mr. Smith."

He did not answer. He held Chicamauga Ridge to his pace with a hand that seemed to have suddenly become a steel talon.

Out of the darkness she had come, back into it she had gone, hated at first for her brazen stupidity and silly-fool talk, but now never to be forgotten, a portrait emblazoned on his memory, in that one sharp ray of moonlight through the drifting clouds. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Reunion in Hell

THE storm, as if tired of its own noise let the clouds part, and then dawn was coming. The two old wagons reached the Ohio. It was still here, and a dense gray fog hung over the river, hiding the ferryman's driftwood shack until they were within fifty feet of it.

It was as Buchanan expected. The Fishers had reached the river well ahead of them. They had dragged out the ferryman and settled on a price for him to set them across. An enormous woman garbed in blue calico appeared in the shack doorway long enough to tell them that, and then slammed the door in Buchanan's and Matthorn's faces.

Then came the impatient wait until the long, flat-bottomed ferry appeared in the gloom down the steep cut. Matthorn slopped down the road just ahead of Buchanan. It was a surprise to hear him start arguing with the dried-up and bench-legged old ferryman.

"A dollar a wagon to set us across!" he snapped. "Man, this is robbery! It should take you not more than fifteen minutes at most. At a dollar a crossing that's four dollars an hour. Why, you infernal lout, fifty cents is the legal fare—"

"The river's up from the rains, hang it!" broke in the ferryman, desperately. "The water's rough an' dangerous out yonder in the middle. Hod Leeder's ferry seven miles above here ain't put across in three days, hand-runnin'. My boat's all I've got, an' a man's got to eat—"

"I'll pay the crossing," put in Buchanan, knowing that every minute counted. "Let's not argue any more about it."

"You're a fool with your money, young man!" snapped Matthorn, turning in the mud and splashing back up the road. "But I suppose that it is your business. I make mine honestly."

The insult made Buchanan's ears sting, but he kept his mouth shut. One had to learn to swallow a lot of things these days. But when Matthorn was out of earshot he put a ten-dollar gold piece in the old ferryman's calloused hand.

"Keep it all," he ordered. "It's worth it—and probably a damned sight more. I only met that fellow a short time ago."

"Yo're all right, but I don't like the big un," grinned the ferryman as he pocketed the money. "His kind would pick the cow lot with the chickens if he thought there might be a nickel in it. He must be the one they want back yonder in Virginia for killin' twenty-seven men a week ago."

"Twenty-seven men?" Buchanan's eyes

widened. How the figures could grow! "You heard *that?*"

"Yes, sir," nodded the ferryman. "That's the tale, true or not I don't know."

"Where did you hear it?" demanded Buchanan, eyes narrowing.

"Two wagons ahead of yuh," explained the ferryman. "The man an' his two sons was talkin' about it when I set 'em across. They'd heard the news back in one of the towns where the telegraph wires come in. And one of my boys first heard about it two days ago from some fellas sayin' they'd like to collect the reward. My boy got mad. He knowed the fella who done the shootin'. He was my boy's cavalry captain, an' my boy fit alongside 'im?"

"What was your son's name, ferryman?"

"Sergeant Zeb Rainey of the Fourth Virginia." The ferryman stiffened proudly. "But he ain't here no more. He killed a damned Road Rider yesterday down at Glover's Mill. They're after him now, an' lyin' that he took the Road Rider's fine saddle hoss an' swum the river with 'im. Mister, a Rainey wouldn't steal nothin'."

"More power to Zeb!' Buchanan's hand slipped back into his damp pocket and came out with another gold piece. "Keep this, and your mouth shut with it."

"I thought them square shoulders had a sort of a cavalry swing to 'em—*stranger.*" The ferryman grinned. "But I don't need this gold to keep my face shut."

"Put that in your pocket," said Buchanan. "After all the Yankee lines Sergeant Rainey used to cut—well, if Zeb can't get through a few Road Riders, he should be shot."

"That's just what I told 'im last night when he slipped back for his clothes," whispered the ferryman, leaning close. "By gad, Cap'n, yuh shore oughta seed that fine hoss. They musta stole it an' the silver-trimmed saddle outa Old Abe's own stables, I'll swear. Yuh might catch up with Zeb somewhere. He's headin for Council Bluffs. An' stay away from Road Riders. They tell me even Missouri's clear hell full of 'em. Stay away from them folks ahead, too. Take the right fork when I get yuh across. The others took the left. They look kinda reward-hungry to me."

He stopped as the wagon Samuel Matthorn was driving came aboard, while old Mose Grundy and his fat Mammy had to wait with the second wagon there in the mud. They pushed off, the current catching them. The boat was held to its sweeping, half-circular course by pulleys threaded to an underwater cable stretching from one bank to another, until the ferryman grounded the boat and dropped the apron.

"Thirteen minutes to a second," growled Matthorn, looking at his big gold watch. "That's making money fast."

"Yuh didn't pay for it!" snarled the ferryman. "Yuh act just like a damn money hog to me."

"Don't use profanity in front of me!" roared Matthorn, stepping forward with both big fists clenched. "I'll tear the head off your scrawny neck and throw it in the river!"

"Not today, yuh won't, mister!" The old ferryman leaped back, a worn talon going inside his ragged bosom and coming out, a cocked six-shooter suddenly filling his hand. "Drive off my boat an' I'll go back an' get yore black man an' the other wagon. Start

to do what yuh say an' I'll blow a hole in yuh big enough for one of yore cut bulls to jump through!"

It was another chance for Buchanan to study Matthorn. The man's face had become sickly-yellow beneath the mattress of red beard. Up on the wagon seat was Susan Adair, the girl he had called Niki. Beside the girl was the woman, certainly a woman of breeding and pride, but with an unmistakable look of crushed spirit now in her eyes.

Suddenly Matthorn wheeled, hurling himself up on the high seat and snatching the jerk-line from the girl's hands.

"Whoa, come, Brandy, Ball!" he roared, a long whip snaking out with the report of a shotgun. "Into your yokes and go!"

The wagon rumbled off the boat and into the poorly graveled road leading up the river-bank. Buchanan stood there with his horse and mule in the clear. The riverman gave a growl of warning as he pulled up the boat's apron and prepared to shove back into the muddy water!

"I'd watch that fella, Cap'n. He's the kind who'd slip a blade in yore kidneys some dark night. I know men, 'cause I see all kinds of 'em come an' go this ol' river. An' another thing," he added as an afterthought, "it ain't just all damnyankees who're bad. If it wasn't for yuh, I'd let that second wagon set on the other side till hell froze over."

Buchanan waited until the second wagon came over. Once he thought he heard quarreling on the front seat of the first wagon, but it was not his business. As old Mose came up the steep slope the ferryman followed him, motioning to Buchanan.

"It's sorter clearin' back from the river on the other side, Cap'n," he said when Buchanan rode down to meet him. "My wife come down to the boat an' told me she saw about twenty men comin' on hossback. I heard 'em hollerin' as I pushed off. They may be after yuh. . . ."

He held up his hand. "No—no more of yore money! I aim to have some trouble with my boat. I'll take the skiff I've got tied alongside an' go back to the shack for some tools. I'll tell them men my cable's pulled out at this end an' it'll take all day to fix it. That'll head them seven miles up the river to Hod Leeder's ferry. Hod'll send 'em twelve miles on up the river. That oughta give yuh a fair start. Good-bye, an' good luck to yuh!"

★

SAMUEL MATTHORN was immediately on the defensive when Buchanan warned him of the horsemen. "I didn't kill that man back there at my camp! I'm a law-abiding gentleman. *You* shot that man—"

"And you were there," nodded Buchanan, getting just about enough of him. "Among the rest of my sins, I've read some law, Parson. I shot the man, but you came away with me without reporting the—er—incident, and that makes you equally guilty in the eyes of the law."

"Then I'll report it in the next town I come to!" cried Matthorn. "I won't have my good name involved!"

Buchanan grinned at him now. "They'll hold you, and may not believe the tale you tell of my coming along. You're the type who rides rough-shod over everything and everybody. There's the road. The one to the left leads to a town about four miles away. I am told that it has both a telegraph station and a jailhouse."

Matthorn was snarling like a mad dog. "If I wasn't a preacher, I'd jump down off this wagon and beat hell out of you!"

"If you hadn't been a preacher," a wolfish little smile twitched Buchanan's lips, "I would have knocked hell out of you when you were brow-beating the old man. Good-morning to you, ladies."

He touched his hat and rode on. He did not intend to bother with Samuel Matthorn again, and yet, hang it, there were the others to think about—the girl and her mother, the two old Negroes.

Old Mose and his wife were free now. They could go where they pleased. Something told Buchanan that they were going along only because of loyalty to the girl and her mother. Thousands upon thousands of former slaves were like that. The hatred belonged mostly to those who had managed to sit far behind the lines.

Phil Buchanan had no bitterness for the men he had met on the battlefields. They had fought well and long. No man could deny them that. In places where they came together as man to man he had found them a thoroughly decent lot. A Northern soldier had divided his hard crust of bread with him and had given him the last of a little cold coffee in his canteen when he lay wounded at Missionary Ridge. Later when night fell the same "damnyankee"—aided by another—had carried him close to his own lines. He might meet them again somewhere, at some far time, and be able to shake their hands for it.

Glancing back when he was two miles from the river bank, he saw that the Matthorn wagons had taken the right fork of the road and were trailing him. There were but few clouds in the sky by this time, and the fog still hung to the river in long, low banks. Before another hour had passed the sun was up, sweeping its long rays out of the east and stretching across the new grass growing as far as eye could see.

By noon it was hot; every cloud was gone, turning the sky over to the brassy heat of the sun. Chicamauga Ridge was becoming worn down, and Buckeye the mule was no better under his load. Behind them the Matthorn wagons trailed lazily, getting farther away all the time. Buchanan was looking for a place to pitch camp and give the horse and mule a rest, but he waited until he could slip out of sight in a series of low ridges.

He was asleep by one o'clock. Tethered on their grazing ropes the horse and the mule slept on their feet close by. At sundown he awoke and sat there in his blankets long enough to note that the horse and the mule were grazing in the deep grass. It must have been midnight before he awoke again, listening to coyotes howl in the distance.

By dawn he was in the saddle again, having brewed himself a small pot of coffee and broiled a few slices of bacon. He was getting into the wide country now. One could see a farm from the top of every little rise, but the farms would pass in time. The real country, as far as he was concerned, still lay ahead—wide, mysterious, full of warring red savages—the real land of the buffalo, the antelope, the traders' huts, and, above all, quick death.

Matthorn's wagons seemed to have disappeared completely. Buchanan expected that, because he was no longer following road or trail unless it was a turn here and there to dodge some farm or cross-road store where gangs of half-drunken loafers might gather.

The northeast tip of Missouri brought the Matthorn wagons back. They had made even better time than Buchanan. Chicamauga Ridge had twice thrown a shoe and gone lame on him. Buckeye had taken a spill one afternoon on a rocky hillside, rolling half-way to the bottom as if he had decided to end it all. Bruised and hide-broken from hocks to muzzle, the mule had lost Buchanan a couple of days to doctor him up.

Samuel Matthorn's lonely westward march was no longer lonely. Buchanan spotted the eight white-faced red oxen and the two huge wagons at sunset one evening from the back of a thinly timbered ridge. The outfit stood below at the rim of a little village, from which a blacksmith's anvil was lifting its bell-like tones in the warm, still air.

Matthorn had fallen in with nine more covered wagons somewhere on the road. As Buchanan approached the village he recognized two of the wagons as those of the Fishers. Sugar Fisher herself helped to account for the most of that recognition. She came bounding up on her good horse like a wild buck, with her red hair bannering behind her. She rode on to her wagons, flung herself out of the saddle with a high kick of her heels like something blown out of a gun-barrel, and disappeared behind the wheels and walls of canvas.

Niki appeared after that, coming from the opposite direction on a prancing black and white pony, with a tall-hatted man handsomely dressed in gray on a big bay to her left.

Niki, Buchanan observed, was a lady. She wore a neat little riding habit and rode a side-saddle, a contrast to the wild red-headed Sugar, whammed on astraddle, no riding habit at all, skirts flying, a patch of bare leg catching the dying sunlight here and there.

Niki waited when she reached her wagons for the gentleman to alight and assist her down. It seemed a little queer for Mr. Philip James Saunders Buchanan to curl his lip at that natural show of gallantry when he recalled that he had done the same thing a thousand times at Red Oak Hall.

The roar of a shot took his mind off of Sugar and Niki. A stone's toss below the wagons, was a square-fronted saloon with a lean-to porch. Buchanan was still more than fifty rods away when the shot was fired, but he could have sworn that he saw the saloon tremble and bulge, and suddenly it was like a stable filled with kicking mules all in the same notion of tearing the walls down.

Now the red bat-winged doors flapped. What seemed to be a bundle of old clothes hurtled through the air from the saloon. The flying thing struck the center post supporting the wooden porch awning, carrying it away as if a cannon ball had hit it, and the flying thing became a man unbundling in mid-air, hands, arms and legs and feet flapping as he sailed over the four plank steps and hit the hard-packed ground.

It was just the beginning of things. A second man followed the first. With no post for him to strike he sailed on, passed over the one already on the ground, and landed with a sickening thud. Another followed him, tearing off one of the bat-wings in his flight. The fourth figure finished carrying away the door.

People were yelling inside, windows smashing, chairs clattering, the pounding feet still trying to shake the saloon down when Buchanan pulled up behind a hastily gathered crowd of gawking spectators in the road that was called the village street. By this time tables and chairs were coming out the door, whiskey bottles following them. Swinging lamps followed, a small roll-top desk followed the lamps. Then, as the crowning achievement of hell-lifting, the devil himself stepped forward with the limp figure of a man clamped in each browny red hand.

The Devil himself would have really looked a lot better, for the thing that stood there looked more like a tall red mule than a man. His face was bloody, his clothing rags, his chest bare and bleeding. His green eyes glared

out at the gathered crowd. He opened his mouth and let out a jackass bray of laughter. Then, he hurled one of his victims to the right, the other to the left, and the two remaining posts parted company with the lean-to roof. Down came the roof in a showering thunder of snapping boards and flying shingles to swallow the raw-boned laughing fool.

It was the first time since he had mustered him out of service after the battle of Atlanta that Captain Phil Buchanan had seen his one-time First Sergeant Zeb Rainey.

CHAPTER THREE

Gunman in the Moon

A BIG black-beard of fifty, dressed in stout homespun jeans, was giving his account of the battle. "It was all 'count of that Spivey Shummley an' Phineas Prickett, them two sharp-nosed little gamblin' fellas who aim to push West with them wagons tomorrow. They thought the raw-bone fella was drunk enough to take over for his teeth, an' they tried to beat 'im out of his fine saddle hoss in a poker game. He won four hundred dollars fair an' square, though Phineas laid down a royal agin the raw-bone's full on queens. The raw-bone reached acrost the table an' shook six cards outa Phineas' sleeve. Spivey was hangin' back. He missed a shot with his one-barreled pistol, an' before he could duck the raw-bone had picked up Phineas an' throwed 'im in Spivey's face. Now, I reckon, they'll hang him."

"Hang who?"

"The raw-bone of course!" snorted the black-beard.

Buchanan had dismounted and was keeping back and out of the way as a gang of men lifted the shattered roof of the porch and dragged the unconscious Zeb Rainey from under the wreckage. Three of the men wore law badges. They took two six-shooters out of Rainey's bloody rags and carried him across the street to a small calaboose under a wide-spreading oak. Unceremoniously they opened the door and tossed him inside without so much as glancing at his wounds to see whether he would live or die.

"They'll come back an' search 'im to see how much money he's got." The growling black-beard had moved up beside Buchanan. "I know how they work in this damn hole. They'll get that fine hoss an' saddle before they're done. They allus take it all."

"You seem to know a lot about Buzzard Cove?" Buchanan kept his voice low. How long have you been here?"

"About four days this time." The black-beard gave him a quick up and down glance. "But I've been here before; had a good friend hung here last spring. I'm Yankee Jim Darby, goin' West with four of them big wagons up yonder to open me a store on the Yellowstone. Had a break-down here an' the blacksmith's gettin' me mixed up. Yuh a stranger here, feller?"

"Just rode in," nodded Buchanan. "I'm going West, also. That's my horse and pack-mule over there. My name," he hesitated, remembered Sugar Fisher, and stuck to his guns, "is Smith."

Yankee Jim Darby grinned. "They get around, them Smiths. Gamblin' man?"

It was Buchanan's turn to grin. "Do I look like a gambler?"

"Yes, yuh do," nodded Yankee Jim emphatically. "Yo've got the long, smooth an' neat hands of a gambler, good for cards an' guns. Used to gamble myself, until I got these." He held out his palms. Buchanan saw that they were full of deep scars. "Got that fightin' a damn Rebel at Chicamauga Creek. Hands ain't much more'n clubs, though I can still use guns. The fella had a long knife an' I had one. Both plain fools, both atterwards admittin' it. No matter now," he shrugged. "War's over, but a lot of mule-head fools can't believe it. Pitch yore camp up near my wagons. I might show yuh a lot. Yo've got the face of a gambler, too. Just like a bullfrog's. Yuh can never tell what a bullfrog's thinkin' by lookin' at 'im."

Buchanan did not camp with him, but he picked a spot not far away, knowing that Yankee Jim was quietly watching him. He had seen the man somewhere, though the black beard hid the most of Darby's face. If he could only see through the beard he would remember where and when they had met.

Zeb Rainey was also on his mind. It had been a waste of breath for Yankee Jim to tell him what these scavengers of Buzzard Cove were going to do. Crooked lawmen like these found their victims in the ever-growing migration into the Far West, and were trail-choppers, preying on strangers and easy marks.

Sugar Fisher had spotted him at once, and came over when Buchanan was staking out his horse. Her hair had been combed. She walked as straight as an Indian, dangerously pretty even in her ill-fitting blue calico, her head held high and stout, brass-toed shoes on her feet.

"Howdy." She did not smile, and before he could answer her she was coming out with the rest of it. "I'm sorry about the other night. You thought, I reckon, I was just a hair-brained hussy. I ain't. I aim to be a lady an' ride a damn side-saddle if it kills me. I can read some an' I can write some. I've got me a book an' I'm goin' to learn ever' word in it if it kills me."

"What kind of a book do you have, Pussy Willow?"

"You like that name?" The emerald green eyes narrowed. "Well," she shrugged, "it's all right if you do. I lied about it. They called another girl that back where I come from. But the book," she looked away from him, "it's called My Lady's Golden Slipper. Don't laugh! I never had a slipper. I'll learn all the words, how to say 'em an' how to put them to pen an' paper, and then, by Gawd, I'll be somebody!

"An' another thing," she had wheeled to go away, but she came back just as quickly, "don't you fear pa an' ma an' the boys. I know you ain't Mr. Smith, an' they know it, but I've laid down the law. They don't dare turn you in, not with what I know about pa an' my brothers. Mr. Matthorn won't, either. That man ain't right, an' he ain't no real preacher. He cusses too much when he things other's ain't listenin'. I'll stand by you, Calvey, until they kick my belly blue."

She was gone, leaving him staring and speechless. What a little Trojan! Women like that would help hold the West when they got there. He saw Niki beyond her, still in her riding habit and sitting on the end of a log like a dainty lady while old Mose and Mammy cooked the evening meal over a little camp fire nearby. The slick-looking lizard in gray was still hanging around her.

He dreamed about that man and his tall, fuzzy hat when he slept, and the stars indicated an hour after midnight he awoke. He had slept half-dressed. It took only a few seconds to slip on his boots and his coat.

As a shadow might move, he set out for the calaboose. The village was quiet, but a guard, smoking a pipe, sat on a bench at the corner of the jail. He slumped off the bench with the pipe still in his mouth when Buchanan brought a Navy Colt down on his head.

In a moment Buchanan had the keys. He slid on to the door, and as the key grated in the lock, he heard somebody stir inside. Cautiously, he cracked open the door and whispered, "Steady, Sergeant. It's Captain Phil."

Rainey gasped, letting something slide to the floor behind him as Buchanan opened the door. "An' me with a railin' pried off a bunk to smash yore head! I'd hug yuh to death, wasn't I still so bloody, Cap'n Phil. Gawd, ain't I glad to see yuh! Where—"

"There's no time to talk now. Let's get this man inside. Take his guns and tie him up with something while I watch. You've got to find your horse and burn wind. I have a couple of my shirts and a pair of pants for you outside. Take the monkey's hat if it'll fit."

Armed now with the guard's weapons, Zeb Rainey was soon slipping away. He took time out to grip Buchanan's hand behind the calaboose.

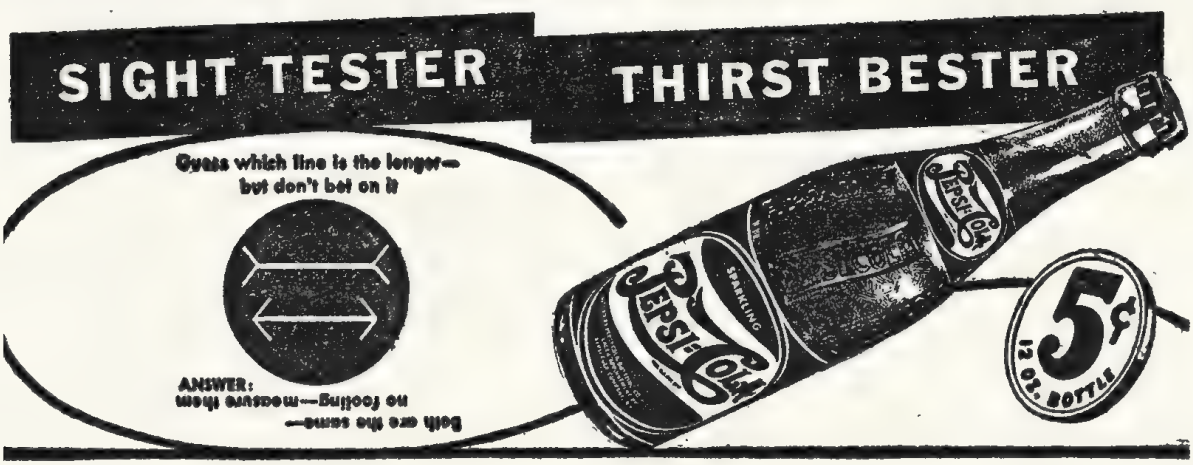
Buchanan gave him a small stack of gold coins, whispered his last few words, and Rainey was gone one way while Buchanan took the other.

* * *

Phil Buchanan was back in his blankets when the first shot down the street split the village wide open. A yell came with the shot, then the fierce, warring hammering of the posse's hoofbeats.

Shots cut ribbons of fire at the rider from either side of the street. Zeb Rainey was yelling like an Indian, a reeling, bobbing figure in his saddle, throwing lead to his right and left. He turned westward at the head of the street, and suddenly the blackness of a low ridge swallowed him.

Buchanan saw man and horse just once more. They swung up hard and clear, right against the low moon. For a moment they appeared to hang there, and then they were gone as if Zeb Rainey had plunged his horse straight into the moon and had lost himself there.



THERE was no more sleep for the rest of the night. A score of men saddled horses and tore out of town, rifle and shotgun barrels glistening, pistols flapping in the starlight, every man swearing as to what he was going to do.

Phil Buchanan could smile at that. Some of the best troops the North could muster had tried to flag down the flying Sergeant Zeb a number of times in the past. Yankee Jim came over to grin as Buchanan arose and was bathing his face in a little stream just below his camp.

"I like that fella, yuh know," he chuckled. "He's got guts."

"And his hands?" Buchanan grinned back at him. "Gambling hands or too big and awkward for that?"

"'Tain't allus the smooth hands." Yankee Jim scratched his chin thoughtfully. Come an' eat breakfast with us. I know yo're a damned Rebel, but the war, I say, is over. Anyhow, I like them Smiths. The ol' bull-necked daddy of the breed musta been a mighty far-travelin' man."

Buchanan, still trying to place him, liked the cuss. He liked him even better just after they had finished breakfast cooked by one of Yankee Jim's bullwhackers, a big, six-foot Negro whose gold tooth shone like a headlight on a locomotive.

Buzzard Cove was not to be outdone. The guard had been dragged out of jail and untied. He was back to consciousness with a bandage on his head and swearing that he had been clubbed down by four big, wolfish-looking men. Eleven heavily armed men now marched into the wagon camp looking for the description the guard had given of his supposed assailants. Apparently every citizen of Buzzard Cove was now wearing a badge.

Yankee Jim's four bullwhackers and a couple of extra men to help out on the trail disappeared inside their wagons at a nod from their boss.

"An' where," demanded one of the Covers of Yankee Jim, "was yuh 'round one or two o'clock this mornin' when that fella got away? Yuh was in the saloon when the fight started, an' yuh went out the back door. Later yuh was heard sayin' the fella we locked up wasn't goin' to get a square deal. I axed where yuh was 'round one or two this mornin'. I'm Gunnar Brecht, chief marshal of this town, an' I aim to have an answer. For all I know, the judge may fine yuh for contempt of court for talkin' about the Cove like yuh did."

"Yeah, it's sometimes done," nodded Yankee Jim. "But for all I know, yuh an' the judge an' the rest of this wild-hawg town can go to hell. Where I was this mornin' is my own damned business. An' I'll add this." He tapped the man on the chest with a horny forefinger. "If yo're the kind that gets sick at the stomach when yuh look down a gun-barrel an' see the fire comin', then yuh better go back home an' quile down with yore pups."

"That's sho' tellin' 'em, boss!"

Everybody looked around with a start at the sound of that voice. It came from the big Negro. He had slid back out of the wagon, an old cavalry saber in his huge right fist, a cocked six-shooter in the other. The rest of Yankee Jim's men had appeared at the same time, dropping silently out of the wagons, each with a cocked Colt in either hand and evil grins on their faces.

Marshal Brecht stammered, suddenly going yellow-faced. "I—I can't be blamed for askin' a question, can I? I—I reckon yo're not one of the fellas we want. Let's go, boys. They musta left the Cove with the raw-bone. No harm meant, folks."

"Shore not," nodded Yankee Jim. "Drop 'round again an' we'll open up a keg of nails for yuh an' yore gun-pups to chaw on."

* * *

They rolled and rode with the sun, and Yankee Jim fell in beside Buchanan on a big, wall-eyed roan with the black Gold Tooth Bill driving his first wagon. By mid-afternoon they saw the gang that had swarmed out of Buzzard Cove returning to the village. Zeb Rainey was not among them, but it was a certainty that they had overtaken him somewhere.

Two men of the gang were roped like sacks of corn across their saddles. Another rode with his right arm in a sling, and a fourth had a bloody rag wound around his head to all but cover his nose and mouth.

Zeb's the kind," nodded Buchanan when the gang had gone on past the wagons without a man among them breaking his sullen silence, "who'd stop and oblige them with a fight to save pushing a horse too fast."

"Yep, he's that." Yankee Jim grinned. "Yuh was a shake ahead of me an' Gold Tooth Bill this mornin'. We was hidin' in the rocks just below when yuh hit the guard. Kinda looks like we might have a little rain from the west, don't it?"

They were inseparable after that. The belief that they had met somewhere grew on Buchanan. Yankee Jim Darby was aware of it, too. It popped out in his eyes every now and then, especially when anger blazed in their dark depths, and sometimes those eyes haunted Buchanan in his sleep. One just did not forget them, full of laughter at one second, sudden death at the next.

Matthorn and the Fishers seemed to have fallen in with each other well enough. Jasper

Fisher was a man that Matthorn could rule with a merciless hand. Then there was the high-hat, Mr. Bloodsoe Spencer— with two wagons and a couple of former slaves to drive them, a young man going West to make his fortune. Somebody said that he had been in in the banking business in the Ohio Valley country.

Samuel Matthorn had taken to him. He had bought the pony somewhere for Niki and actually seemed to be pushing his step-daughter the man's way as if set on marrying her off as quickly as possible.

The eleventh wagon belonged to a little, pucker-mouthed fellow who called himself—of all names—Cedar Poorly. He had a sallow skin and a thin, drooping mustache that looked too feeble to hold itself up. His wife was a hump-backed woman of forty with a nerve-wracking cough. Of those supposed to join them in Buzzard Cove none had come. Zeb Rainey had evidently put the scotch to the wheels there, leaving those who intended to come too bent and broken to try anything for another couple of weeks.

When Council Bluffs finally appeared, Buchanan had ceased to wonder about any of his fellow travelers. An extra forty-odd wagons had joined the procession in little trains at various points along the trail. The Fishers were blooming out, beginning to spend money freely in the villages they passed through.

Jasper Fisher, Ashur and Henny showed signs of having had too much to drink a number of times, but they were smart enough to keep it a secret from Matthorn. Sugar's mother sewed constantly on the front seat of her husband's lead wagon. The garment she was making was mysterious and dark, something in the process of growing that made Sugar's eyes fill with anticipation each time she rode alongside of her father's wagon.

Then Council Bluffs, on the high flat east bank of the Missouri with a dying sun spreading it with its last red rays as if giving the town a bath in blood. The chasm of the river dropped straight down and away in front of it, the banks sweeping up again on the other side. Long lines of wagons were drawn up everywhere, bringing a chuckle from Yankee Jim's beard.

"Look at 'em—an' 'cross yonder more an' more on the come!" he grinned. "See all them outfits west of the river? Well, they're across. I'll lay yuh twenty to one they move at dawn, shore as yo're born. If this keeps up it won't surprise me to hear of 'em givin' all that country east of the Mississippi back to the Indians an' ever'body movin' out here. Look yonder! What's Matthorn doin'?"

Matthorn had acquired a big bay from one of the "movers" who had joined the train. Now he was dashing about, waving his big hat. Slowly, like a snake going into a coil, he was bringing the wagons around into a big circle as if they were in the heart of the real fighting Indian country far west of the Missouri.

"Seems like, I swear," growled Yankee Jim, "he's took it in his head to make himself captain of the train!"

"Let him play himself out," coaxed Buchanan when he saw that Yankee Jim was in the notion of fighting. "He'll do it soon enough."

For a split-second cold disdain burned in Yankee Jim's eyes. "Yeah, I know yuh," he added with a nod. "Buzzard Cove was the second time we'd met. The other time was at Shiloh, yuh a-comin' at me, and me a-comin' at yuh, hell-bent to tear each other apart. Yuh with yore reins in yore teeth, a gun in one hand spittin' fire an' a bloody saber in the other. Me pourin' lead right at yuh.

"Yuh cut me down an' nigh half in two, but I said when I was fallin' I liked yore face. Still do." He thrust out his hand and Buchanan gripped it. "I know about the trouble recent behind yuh," he grinned. "Knowed that in Buzzard Cove, too. I like yuh, Cap'n Buck, an' by Gawd, when I like a man I'm his friend. Let anybody try to collect a reward on yuh an' yo'll see where I stand, but I'm damned if I ain't seen about all of Matthorn an' that tight-pants Bloodsoe Spencer that I aim to!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Fighting Country

SPRING was in the wind in all its coming glory, and the movers, freighters and traders were there from all over. All the East really seemed to be moving West. Hundreds had gathered at St. Louis, Independence or Kansas City. West of Kansas City they struck the fork of the Oregon and the Santa Fé. At Santa Fé proper, many would wing north on the Spanish Trail. Others would follow the Oregon to a point just south of the Snake to take the California Trail.

A fourth of them knew where they were going, but many of those were apt to change their minds before they were halfway to the goal they had set for themselves. Yankee Jim was hell-bent to swing north from Fort Laramie.

It was natural for trouble to bloom quickly, and it came the first night west of the Bluffs. There were more than one hundred and eighty wagons, carts and pack outfits now in the train. Convinced that a trading post was the thing, Phil Buchanan had purchased four big wagons and a dozen yokes of good oxen in Council Bluffs, and had packed the wagons to their canvas tops with goods. Youths out of families in the train had been hired to drive

them, and then came the first camp and the first trouble.

The brassy blasting of a bugle called them all together when the supper fires were dying. Most trains openly elected their captains at their general starting point, but dissension all around had marked the start of this one. It was no surprise to see Samuel Matthorn mounted on an upended water barrel beside his forward wagon when the crowd came up. The fine-aired Mr. Bloodsoe Spencer sat on the tongue, grandly smoking a cheroot.

"I have decided," Matthorn began, "to have Mr. Spencer read the rules and regulations to be followed on the trail. As captain of this train I have written the rules, and I must demand the respect and obedience of every man, woman and child in the train."

"Hold, now!" growled Yankee Jim. "Who the hell made yuh captain of the train, Matthorn?"

"I'll tolerate no profanity, Mr. Darby!" roared Matthorn. "That is one of the rules all must follow. We are heading into a lawless and—"

"I axed who made yuh captain?" cut in Yankee Jim. "Yuh won't answer because yuh can't. But I can tell yuh who's gonna be captain. His name's Phil Buchanan, by Gawd!"

"That murderer!" bellowed Matthorn. "Damn your loud mouth, Darby. I'll stomp it off your face!"

"Fight!"

No one tried to part them for a second. After that it was too late. Matthorn had lunged, making a wild jump forward, both feet kicking as he came down. Darby was knocked to one side. He slipped, fell, and came up with Matthorn atop of him pounding him with both fists. Yankee Jim Darby twisted himself out of it like a bullsnake, and then he was fighting, boring in, dark eyes full of murder.

The most of them had never seen such a bull-fight. Yankee Jim drove Matthorn back alongside of the wagon. Matthorn was still trying to use his feet, but he was also battering away with his fists. Yankee Jim's hammering mauls were finding his face, smashing into it, breaking the nose nad mouth, the blood flying. But Matthorn came tearing in, still kicking. He got another kick to the side of Yankee Jim's face. He went down. Matthorn jumped straight for his face with both feet.

It was then that hell struck the scene—a tall, raw-boned thing in yellow buckskins, a ten-inch knife swinging on a chain around his neck, a revolver at either hip. It was Zeb Rainey, and no one knew where he had come from or how he got there. As a fighting cyclone in action, he drove Matthorn back, slumping him against the wagon under his mad pounding. Suddenly he stopped, left hand in Matthorn's long, heavy hair, his ten-inch knife filling his right hand as it left its beaded sheath.

"An' now, by Gawd," he snarled, "I'll show yuh how to cut a head off!"

"Rainey! As you were!"

Zeb Rainey knew that voice—would know it in hell! He had heard it in the thundering of guns and the pound of running hoofs too many times in the past. He froze where he stood, left hand still in Matthorn's hair, the right one wrapped around his neck. Suddenly he stepped back and stiffened.

"Yes, sir!" he snapped.

Buchanan shoved Rainey aside. Matthorn slipped and fell to the ground. Yankee Jim was up as if in a daze. Bloodsoe Spencer was up, also, white-faced and watching them narrowly. That rat would bite if they cornered him, but Buchanan did not notice him.

Yankee Jim and Rainey were to be handled now. Buchanan drove them out of the crowd ahead of him. As they reached the other side of the mob he glanced up and saw Sugar Fisher on her horse, and she smiled at him. The mystery of the garment her mother had been making was no longer a mystery. It was a riding habit—and of all things, Sugar was riding a side-saddle and wearing a funny little hat with an eagle's feather to trim it!

It was the beginning of real trouble for Phil Buchanan. It seemed that everybody in the train knew all about him. He had never thought of commanding them, he did not even want any part of the command, but the fires of an election had been kindled. No one slept until after midnight, and the die was cast. They wanted a fighting man to lead them, and Buchanan was told that he was It.

Zeb Rainey fell into the work with him as naturally as a pig to a trough. He had been lucky at poker and faro with the gold Buchanan had given him behind the calaboose in Buzzard Cove, but he had not been quite so fortunate when it came to the would-be toughs and the marshals of Council Bluffs. Buchanan had heard something of a wild man cleaning out a saloon, and he had suspected Rainey as the wild one. Run out of the Bluffs, he had come on, watching the trail for Buchanan.

Buchanan did not sleep all night. He picked his crowd, men who had been up and down the trails, former army scouts and Indian fighters—hell's own conglomeration of badmen, cutters and shooters, yet thorough devils to depend on in trouble. There was grumbling about it and curses behind his back, but Phil Buchanan knew what he was doing.

The first dawn west of the Bluffs came to them with sleepy men and women around their fires, the stock being brought in. The air was

gray and cold, the land ahead lonely and mysterious, stretching on as far as the eye could see. One last star hung out there on the undulating horizon rim, like an evil omen of things to come.

That was the Indian country out there, though they were still having spasmodic spurts of trouble with the red man east of the Bluffs. Now they would see more and more of him, the feathers of the war-bonnets spinning in the wind. Some time they would hear the pound of the ponies, the fierce cries in the night, the *zurp* of the arrows leaving the bow, the slash and slither of their striking to the mad tune of the roaring guns. . . .

"Roll out!" The words followed a bugle's brassy calling. "Roll out! Wagons to yore places! Line up!"

Slowly, the train unwound, gradually stretching out, snake-fashion in the morning light. When the sun came many men pointed toward the northern sky. Two miles away, on a rise with the sky sun-slashed behind him, sat a lone figure of a man on a tall horse, as still as a statue, majestic for the moment—a warrior of the red clans watching another invasion of his country.

Suddenly he wheeled his horse and was gone, war-bonnet wabbling in the wind as he dropped from sight.

"Pawnee, I think," grunted a California Forty-Niner. "But maybe Ute, Cheyenne, Crow, Sioux, Two Kettle, Kiowa or Ogallala. There ain't no real tellin' from this far, but they're all out here!"

★

JUST before dawn on the Platte they received their first baptism of gun-fire and arrows. The signs of the coming fight had been there for four days and nights, but Phil Buchanan had never tried to command an unrulier lot. Those who had been soldiers were willing to work with him, but the others had never been used to command. Women prodded their men into revolt. Innumerable fights took place, the most of them starting with no more than a word.

There were Yankee Jim and Matthorn—Matthorn's face still in the process of healing—and those two had to be kept apart. Buchanan twice drew the fire from Niki and Spencer when they insisted on galloping on ahead of his scouts. The girl was not the one at all he had seen that night in the rain. An amazing change had come over her. She seemed to be desperately playing some game. And Sugar Fisher appeared to watch it all like a cat watching a mouse. She had more books and was reading them. One never saw her without one of them in her hand.

When it came it was like lightning gashing here and there from the outposts to northward. The outposts fell back slowly—good men out there, Rebel and Yankee shoulder to shoulder. They tried to hold them off while the stock was being rushed inside the wheel-locked circle of the train. From the start they knew it was a losing fight, and yet they held grimly on, until the stock had been saved and the camp up and pitching into the fight.

The thunder of ponies rolled in close, the Indians yelling. Hails of arrows and bullets poured into the side of the train, and then they were sweeping back, red men sprawling off their flying ponies and dying as the white men and many of their women poured their lead into them with a withering fire.

It came again, charge after charge in the darkness that hugged the flat above the river, and it was the same old story that belonged to every Indian fight. The reds held their fire, charging straight in, coming close, letting everything go in their wild squalling and screaming. They wheeled right when they should have charged straight on into the wall of wagons, and there, with Buchanan holding the fire until the proper second, they took all the whites had to offer.

The first graying light of dawn saw them drawing off, wolves of the plains and hills who left dead bucks and dead ponies scattered for a long mile behind them. As if they had come from nowhere, they disappeared the same way, but they were still out there, watching from the hills and ravines for the wagon train to pull out so they might gather up their dead and their wounded. Before many nights passed they would be back again, striking just as swiftly and desperately.

Seven of the white men and an old woman

Our boys are giving us the power of their two strong arms, their battle-trained minds, and the courage of their fighting hearts. But they need bullets, guns, bombs, planes and tanks to make a real fight against Hitler's and Hirohito's regimented murderers! War Bonds and Stamps will help supply them! BUY A BOND EVERY PAY-DAY!

had paid for the attack with their lives. Matthorn—not yet able to keep his mouth shut—was for burying them on the spot, but Buchanan ordered the dead hauled on to the next camp to keep the bodies from being dragged from their graves and mutilated.

That act alone changed the minds of many of them toward him, but he did not hold them. He did not side with them in their defensive beliefs when it came to putting a wagon train over the prairies and hills. Wagon train captains before him had seemed always to believe in waiting for the attacks to come to them and merely holding them off. But he believed in the offensive when attacked.

The cavalry was in his blood, the squeak of saddle leather, the roar of the lightning-swift charge. Men grumbled by the score when he took them off their wagons and ordered their womenfolk to drive while he started drilling them on the way, a mean business little relished by even the tireless Zeb Rainey.

Zeb Rainey had fallen heels over head in love with Sugar Fisher. If he could not follow the girl on horseback or afoot, he followed her everywhere with his eyes. At every chance he was talking to her or standing and watching her, and Sugar was having troubles enough with her riding habit and the sidesaddle.

She simply did not belong to a side-saddle. She took spills that would have put a man in bed in his wagon, and once Buchanan came upon her with Zeb beside her after a spill. She was crying her eyes out, the awkward looking Rainey squatting beside her with one long arm around her and trying his best to comfort her.

And there was Matthorn and Niki, and that damned Bloodsoe Spencer. A green fire kindled in Phil Buchanan's eyes everytime he saw them together. The girl still played her confounded game. She spoke to Buchanan in a low voice each time she was certain that the eyes of her stepfather or Spencer were not upon her. Sometimes Phil Buchanan caught himself cursing her under his breath. She could, he reasoned, treat him with a little more courtesy than a damned dog!

Matthorn had changed, too. He had become more smooth, gathering his own little clique around him. Before they reached Fort Laramie he had about twenty families who took sides with him in every argument. By the time they left the Fort he had doubled his followers, and their mighty gatherings were almost a secret meeting. Once settled on the frontier that fellow was going to be a power or break his neck trying.

A few wagons had dropped out of the train at Fort Laramie, but it was just as well. More than thirty other big outfits waiting there had joined up with Buchanan, a tough lot of traders, trappers and bull-whackers. They crawled north, routing bands of Indians waiting to attack by surprise charges before the reds could carry out their plans. The big rub came on the gray-rock bluffs of the Powder and the western rim of the badlands.

"They're layin' for us ahead, Cap'n," reported a tall old scout who galloped up to him a mile ahead of the train one evening just before they were to make camp at sundown. "Every damn Indian that ever blowed outa hell! The hills b'ile with 'em east an' west. The camp on the river will be the best place in the world for 'em."

"And what would you do?" demanded Buchanan. "Turn back?"

"A few miles, yeah!" exclaimed the scout. "It's the right an' proper thing to do. If we camp for a week back there on the north end of the big mesa, that'll wear 'em down of waitin'."

"We don't want to wear them down," he cut in. "We'll go in and give them their chance. Keep your mouth shut about it."

"But—but," stammered the old scout, "that's like usin' human bait to trap wolves! Damn it, there's women an' children—"

"Go hide among them if you're afraid!" snapped Buchanan. "If we've got to fight, then, by God, we'll fight!"

He called Rainey to him. A couple more Rebels and three Yankees joined them a short time later. While the old scout watched and scowled they laid their plans, and Rainey and the others scattered to start carrying them out. Eighty hard-trained fighting men were soon dropping out of the train and going into hiding where lone Indian scouts would not see them.

At midnight with no more than half the camp suspecting and Yankee Jim left behind to handle it, Buchanan started to steal out of camp, leading his horse behind him in the darkness. He walked slowly, keeping his hand on Chicamauga Ridge's cheek-strap. An Indian spying on the train might pop out of the bushes or the rocks anywhere. He was stopped by a harsh voice in the darkness before he was eighty yards from the last wagon.

"Halt, Phil Buchanan! Lift your hands! We know what you're up to!"

It was Samuel Matthorn and Spencer, backed by about a dozen others. Cocking weapons sounded all around him as Buchanan halted. More men arose out of the darkness, forming a snarling and hissing little mob. A glance told Buchanan the rest of it: This was Matthorn's and Spencer's chance to make a great show of themselves, and they had picked the most dramatic moment.

"We've heard of your hellish plot!" Matthorn was yelling as if he wanted everybody in camp to hear him. "The infernal army in you would sacrifice the women and children of

this train for your own glorification. Lift your hands, I say! This is the hour of revolt for the sane men and women of this wagon train! We're going to hang you on a wagon tongue and break your murdering neck!"

The entire camp appeared to swell into an angry rumbling. A child cried out back there in quick fright. A muffled shot sounded as if it had been fired close against some one's body, a woman's scream lifting with it. Before a man could open his mouth a general fight inside the train was under way.

CHAPTER FIVE

Wagon Train Rebels

EVEN rats would fight when backed into a corner, and Buchanan had had all that in mind when he had ordered his best men to drop back and take the outside to wait for him. As he was marched back into camp, it looked as if Samuel Matthorn had evened his score with Yankee Jim Darby.

A tall Mississippian had jammed the muzzle of an old flint-lock pistol between his shoulder blades and pulled the trigger. Darby had gone down, probably never knowing what had struck him.

Others who had arisen in alarm had been clubbed down by picked men waiting to pounce upon them. The whole camp was in an uproar, a shot still sounding here and there. To Buchanan's right a tall man by the name of Marcus Cooke lay in his gangling wife's arms, the woman sobbing over him, their two children standing beside them in silent wonder, too scared and mystified to cry as they stared at the bloody hole in their father's forehead.

The camp, for once, was exactly like Matthorn wanted it. By surprise his gang had taken over. Every man and woman who were friends of Buchanan had been covered.

As Buchanan was marched on, shorn of his guns, he saw men and women lined up ahead and in front of Matthorn's wagons. A grinning mob there with cocked weapons were making them stand with their hands above their heads. To Buchanan's surprise, the Fishers were there, too. Sugar looked at him, the only one who dared to speak.

"They're out to do you, Calvey." She smiled thinly, speaking slowly and carefully. "My readin' didn't help much, did it?"

"Buchanan first!" snapped Matthorn. "And listen, the rest of you!" His voice swelled all over the camp. "From now on you will have sensible leadership. We are in a trap here. This murderer did not tell you about it. Indians are all around us. We could have camped out of the danger zone, but this fool would not have it. I tell you, he is cursed by the love of bloodshed!"

Once started, Matthorn was like a howling jackal. He loved the sound of his voice, his play on words. Mob psychology was something he understood. He had Buchanan just where he wanted him, backed against the double-trees of his wagon with his hands high in the air, two grinning fools keeping him there at the points of their guns.

Buchanan wondered what had become of Niki and her mother, that sad-eyed woman he had never heard speak. His hands were up almost against the front seat, resignation gradually taking hold of him. He was not even listening to Matthorn's raging until something touched his hands in the thick darkness.

He knew the touch when it came. Sixshooter butts to a fighting man were as familiar as the nose on his face—and somebody inside Matthorn's wagons had thrust them into his hands. He thought of Niki, old Mose and his Mammy, but not the girl's mother. Then Niki's voice came to him from out of the darkness somewhere beyond the ranting Matthorn.

"Sam Matthorn is a liar! Those wagons are loaded with guns and ammunition to trade to the Indians. They'll kill white women and children when he opens a trading post on the Ruby River with Bloodsoe Spencer! The Spencer wagons are the same! Guns to kill whites, I tell you! Search those wagons, people! That man is a traitor! That man married my mother only for her money—"

"Catch that wench!" roared Matthorn. "Stop her lying mouth!"

"Search the wagons!" screamed the girl. "If I'm lying, then you can hang me beside Captain Phil Buchanan!"

"Kill her, damn her!"

"Not yet, Matthorn!" Even as he yelled, Buchanan's hands were coming down. The two men guarding him had turned their heads, staring with their mouths open. It was the last time they stared. Two shots roared, and the two guards dropped. "You next, Matthorn! Spencer!"

Matthorn looked at him like a fool with his mouth open to catch flies. He did not know what to do, but Spencer must have been seized with a convulsion of some sort. Eyes popping, he buckled at the middle. His hands looked doll-like as he whipped them to his high waistband where a couple of little, flat and four-barreled pistols were riding snugly against his belly. There were two bursting flames of fire, and the popping eyes were not there any more.

Bloodsoe Spencer was still there, standing on his feet, the pretty hat at its rakish angle, his body in its crouch, but his eyes no longer popped. They were not there.

Suddenly he went down, all loose and

squashy. Then came a cry—showing that Niki was still alive—that seemed to paralyze every man, woman and child and freeze them in their tracks:

"Indians! Indians!"

THEY came in far ahead of their time. It was an opportunity they could not miss—pale face fighting pale face in their own camp! They might have suspected a trick. It was too perfect to be true, and yet scouts with beady-sharp eyes had been watching. They had seen the blood, and blood meant the straight tongue. As they had planned, they hit from the east and the west, hell's own death-cloud on the move.

If they had been schooled in the white man's way of fighting they would have come on through as a body. As it was, some did come on through. Dozens tore through the wagons, tomahawks flying. They killed a man, a woman here, a child there. Mesmerized by their own rush, they did not take full advantage of the situation. Once inside the train, once into the place of unrestricted murder, they seemed lost.

With death upon them, those who had been fools enough to listen to Matthorn and Spencer were shocked out of it. Nobody mattered but themselves now. Here was death! Fight it! Do not let it catch you! That was the instantaneous thought, self-preservation the thought taking command of all else.

Phil Buchanan, first a soldier, killed a buck to his right, another to his left, the cap-an'-ball Navy .36's then empty and a long job to reload. He forgot the screaming of the women, the crying of the children, the moaning of the dying, for a good soldier always moved as an automaton in a fight. A bugle came into his hands; and if he lived to be a thousand he would never know who picked up that old bugle—a relic of the dead South—and tossed it to him.

He blew his heart, his soul and guts into it. It was something the worst soldier in the world would have understood, would have heeded. Bare-headed, he stood there, the shots and arrows flying around him, the notes clear as a bell rising and falling, the sounds striking terror even into savage Indian hearts. They had heard those notes before!

Somewhere out there in the distant darkness the indomitable Zeb Rainey heard them. Once a first sergeant, always a first sergeant. Men stirred, saddles squeaked; horses snorting and lunging, the lather dripping from their bits, their hoofs becoming a low, rumbling thunder sweeping in for the kill. The cavalry coming in, to do, to die, to get it done and over—and to hell with the cost!

The train was in action now. They cleared the inside of the wagons, they threw them back. Men and women fighting shoulder to shoulder, Niki somewhere among the lot. That was in itself a laugh!

Phil Buchanan had never fought a fight like this. It seemed odd, certainly out of place, women loading rifles for their men, others shooting beside their men—one general, bursting hell where everybody had something to do! Even Shiloh was never like this! Nor Pickett's mad charge to hold Hell!

Somewhere out there they came in, fell back, came in again, crushing and killing. Five hundred warriors were caught on the rim of the bluffs and swept into the powder-colored river below. Horses died, men died, and ponies died, some of them screaming like old women, some like girls, some like—Niki!

The air clouded, cleared, and clouded again. This was no show. The Indians had their hearts and souls in it. The whites had their women and children, their lives in their hands—and who cared for death!

Yankee Jim appeared from somewhere, dazed, bleeding at the mouth, a Navy .36 roaring in each hand. Not dead yet, Yankee Jim, and going to live a long time! On his side, eyes glazed, he shot the amazed Samuel Matthorn through the head, killing him on the spot. Captain Phil Buchanan kicked a hot six-shooter out of his hand a few moments later, and fought on dumbly, blindly, a soldier knowing nothing else—nothing else except that this was the show-down, stand or die!

* * *

Morning came after a thousand years. Niki came from somewhere. Phil Buchanan stood there, a Colt in one hand, old saber in the other, nostrils swelling and blowing like a winded horse's. Somewhere in it Niki had told him that her mother had slipped him the six-shooters out of the wagon. Old Mose and his Mammy came at last, hovering over him. Sugar Fisher came from somewhere, crying when they brought Zeb Rainey in with an arrow buried in his raw-boned chest. Zeb would get well, and live for her.

"I'd never be a lady anyhow, Calvey," she wept. "Hell, I'll never learn to ride a damned side-saddle!"

What did it matter, all of it? Here was the Powder, coming up to join the Yellowstone. Up the Yellowstone would be the Tongue, coming up also to meet the Yellowstone.

Ten years later there would be Fort Keough, then would be the railroads. Somewhere—always beside him—there would be Niki, the girl who had dropped, lithe as a panther, that night out of the wagon beside the road in the rain. Mose and Mammy would be with them until they died, in this land, land of the new beginning. . . .

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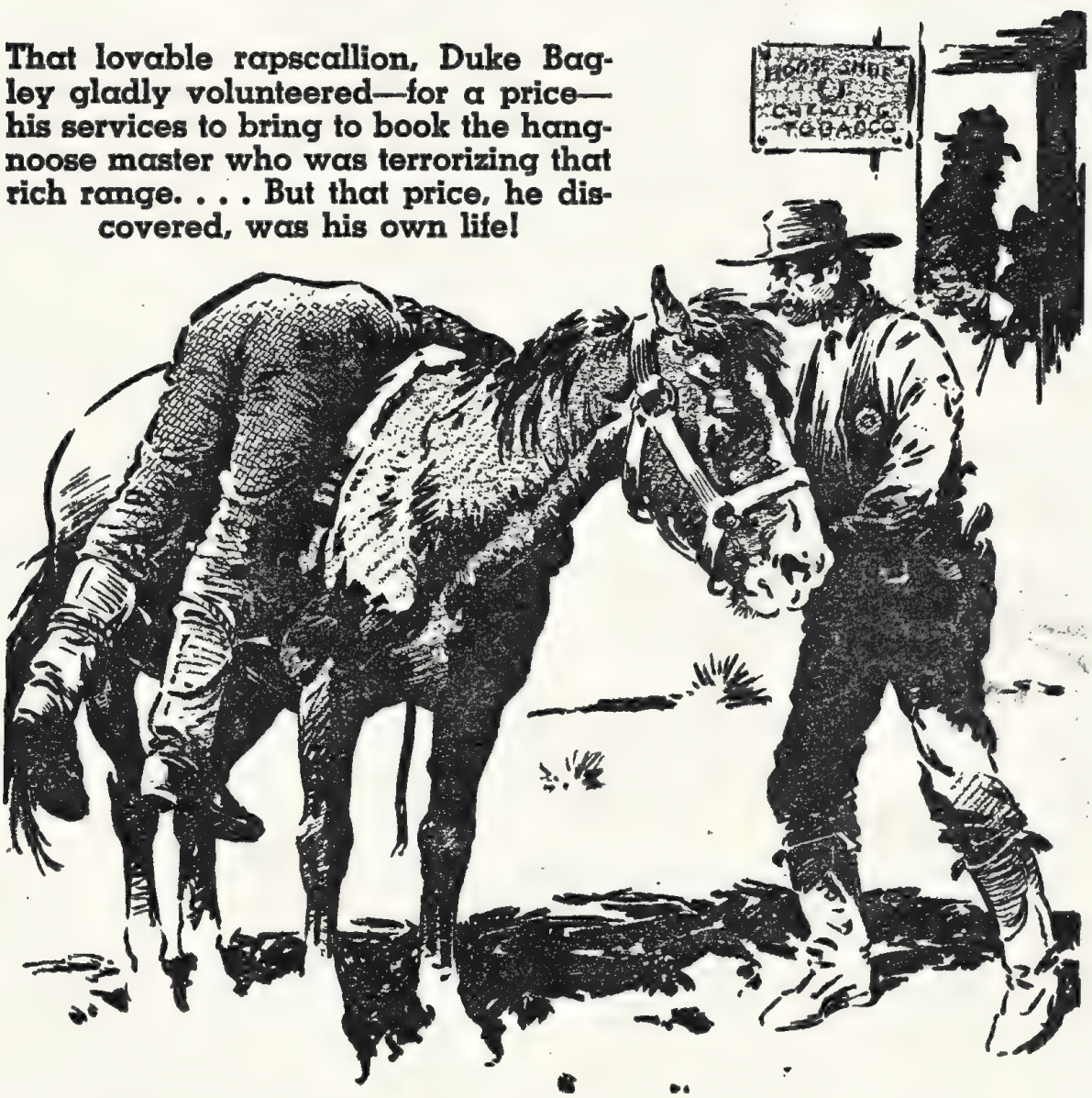
THE DUKE HANGS HIGH!

A Duke Bagley Novel

By William R. Cox

That lovable rapscallion, Duke Bagley gladly volunteered—for a price—his services to bring to book the hangnoose master who was terrorizing that rich range. . . . But that price, he discovered, was his own life!



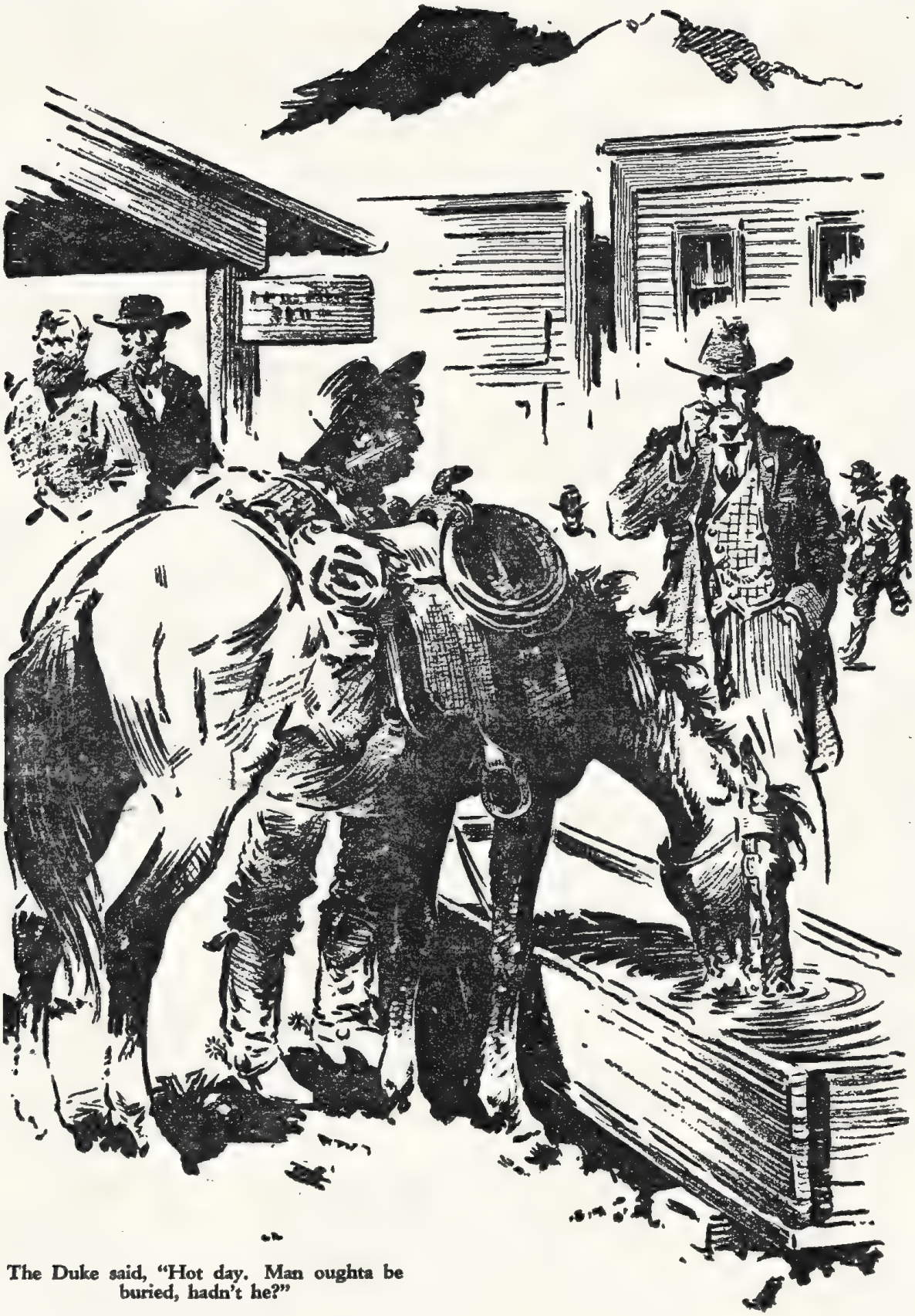
CHAPTER ONE

While the Hangnoose Waits

ONCE over the Border, the Duke evaded Tombstone and took the northward road. Petey, the big black horse, trotted amiably in the sun, for the air was cool. The Duke said, "They tell me Jack Stilwell is operating up here in Plowtown. Yaas, indeed! Old Jack! What's good enough for Jack is good enough for us. Mighty fine gambler in the old days. Yaas, indeed!"

Petey tossed his head and climbed a steep rocky hill. The road widened and went down and there were green trees and a river and the ever-changing Arizona landscape melted into a valley of pleasing aspect. Plowtown lay straight ahead.

The Duke paused, pushing his white som-



The Duke said, "Hot day. Man oughta be buried, hadn't he?"

brero upon his broad forehead and scowled, surveying the scene.

He was a big man, fleshy, with wide shoulders and ridiculously lean and soft hands. His prominent nose had a harsh quality, relieved by a slight bulbousness at the base, sure sign of ribald habits. His watery blue eyes held humor. He wore his fair hair longer than the current style of the mid-Eighties and his sober, well-fitting clothing and hand-stitched boots bordered upon dandyism. From the saddlebag he produced a pint of bourbon which he tilted at the clear blue sky, listening to the gurgle, allowing the life-giving fluid to flow gently down his throat. He said, "Yaas, indeed, there are farmers. I can see the plows. I can see the brown furrows of the earth which has been gashed. The Old West is suffering, Petey, under the bludgeons of the peasant who tills the ground."

Petey evinced an interest in a tuft of green grass. Duke replaced the bottle and unlimbered a pair of fine field glasses gained from an Army officer in a game of alleged chance. He swept the valley, noting the wide, well-traveled way, espying the smoke of the town far beyond, upon a bend of the Mehila River. Duke drew in his breath, staring.

He gathered up the reins. He said to Petey in a very soft voice, "Yaas, indeed! Very interesting. Cattle, farming—farming, cattle. They never mix, my black-hided friend. Never!"

Petey understood enough to pick up his heels and fly down the mountainside, sending rocks skittering beneath his shod hoofs. Duke loosed the rifle in its boot at his left knee and shifted the belt containing his long Colt.

They clattered onto the road and made the turn. From up on the opposite slope of the hill a rifle crackled. Petey drove for the cottonwoods without urging, being by now quite gun-wise. A bullet tore its way past Duke's ear and his own rifle came out.

He almost ran full tilt into the gruesome, dangling thing which hung from the spreading branch of a cottonwood. He ducked and switched in the saddle, searching the hillside whence the shot had come. He saw two figures making for a break in the cliffs. He sent two shots whining up there, but the men were within the fissure and gone from sight. They were riding chestnut horses, both alike, and each wore a black, wide hat and black shirt, and that was all Duke could note with his sharp and all-seeing eye.

He wheeled Petey back and forced the horse alongside the hanging man. He swept his Bowie from its hiding place between his shoulder blades and slashed its keen blade at the rawhide, working swiftly in case there should be life remaining in the swaying body.

He dismounted, bending over the man. He saw at once that life was extinct. The body was warm, but there was no motion in pulse or heart.

It was the body of a lean man, dressed like a rancher, but soberly; a man of substance, Duke thought. The pockets of the clothing, however, revealed nothing. The man had been stripped clean.

Petey neighed and Duke looked from the narrow, still features of the corpse and saw a horse standing nearby. It was a roan, with a brand marking "KF." Duke caught the horse without effort, lifted the body and draped it over the saddle, tying it with the reata which had done the dirty work of cutting off the man's breath. Then he mounted Petey and set out for Plowtown and his friend Jack Stilwell.

His way led past two of the farm-ranches, and he noted the well-kept fence, the fields lying fallow and rich. There were orchards, and beyond them each ranch concealed a house. These people, he saw, built well and desired to be left alone. He scowled, wondering why this man from KF Ranch should be on the road which led past the Lazy Y, the Cross and Dot and the Running R. He came to the largest place of all, an establishment with barn buildings stretching behind a fine large adobe ranch house and read a painted sign, "The Big M Ranch, Heber Lyman, Prop."

Duke paused. He said softly, "So! 'Heber', eh? Jackleg Mormons, no doubt, my four-footed companion." He fished three small red balls from his fancy vest. He juggled them in his nervous white hands, making a parabola of leaping crimson in the sun. He gathered them in, between his fingers, manipulating them into four balls, then to three, then to four, then in spectacular pass, back to one ball only. He put his playthings away and turned to survey the sharp, ascetic features of the dead man athwart the roan marked KF. "Mormons. Farms. Jack Stilwell running a town—and a bar, no doubt. Yaas, indeed!"

He hesitated, now unsure of himself. If he toted a dead Mormon into town, Jack Stilwell might not take it too kindly. Jack had always been a sudden person. And it had been Duke's information that Jack owned the sheriff, a certain Bob Take, of fond memory to Duke Bagley's early frontier days.

While he waited he found his bottle and drained it. He was taking it down from his lips when a tight voice said, "Get them up!"

★

DUKE tossed the bottle into the bushes along the road. He elevated his hands hat-rim high and waited. From behind him the same voice said, "Let's have a look at you before I finish you off, you renegade!"

Duke turned carefully, keeping his hands up. He saw a young man in work clothes, his face tanned and taut, a steady sixgun clutched in one hand. The man stood beside an unshod pony and had evidently ridden out of the bushes lining the Big M Ranch. He said, "You look like a damn rascal, all right. How the hell did you bushwhack Kenyon? And—*how did you know he had the money?*"

The youth's accents were slurred, his posture hipshot and easy despite his tenseness. Duke said softly, "You're a Texian. You're no Mormon!"

The young man said sharply, "I'm Cole Wist!" as if it meant something to mention that name.

"I'm Duke Bagley," said the big man amiably. "I cut this corpse down and was bringin' it in to Jack Stilwell. Yaas, indeed. Jack's expecting me right now."

The Texan said, "You know Stilwell?"

"Knew him years ago. Yaas, indeed," said Duke. "Jack and me were closer'n that!" He compressed two fingers of his left hand, moving his arm sharply. The young man involuntarily shifted his glance to the compelling motion.

And Duke's right hand shot out. His closed fist connected with the Texan's jaw. His left hand swooped in a striking slap, the edge clipping Cole Wist's wrist, knocking the gun from his hand. Wist spun, caught entirely unawares, then swung back, both fists plying.

Duke sidestepped with amazing nimbleness. His left fist described a short arc. It landed plumb upon Wist's chin. The young, husky cowpuncher absorbed the wallop, staggered like a drunken man, then dropped his head and doggedly came for more.

Duke said, "This brawl ain't respectful to that poor dead man! No, sirree. Can't have this!"

He drew his gun in one lightning motion, raised the muzzle, let the barrel fall behind the Texan's ear with a motion almost gentle. The tough youth hit the ground and lay still.

Duke holstered the weapon and said regretfully, "Wish I had that gumption—and wind! Tough young lad, Yaas, indeed! Now I think we shall go to town."

He mounted Petey and rode a little faster, pondering the actions and words of the impetuous young Texan. Cole Wist was a clean-cut, handsome young fellow. It seemed a pity that he should be strung in with a gang of cheating, many-wived Mormons.

Duke held no especial brief for Mormons—they were scattering around the country and their well-known proclivity for hard work and frugality was anathema to such a roistering character as Duke Bagley. . . .

Plowtown was a solid community, the Duke saw at once. The road spread wide, leading into Crown Street, well-packed, sun-baked. The buildings were plain but substantial. There were two stores, three saloons, several other establishments of business to denote prosperity. "Jack's" was printed over the largest of the saloons and alongside was the best-stocked general store, obviously a part of the same enterprise. The sheriff's office was built onto the adobe jail, which looked disconcertingly strong to the eye of the Duke.

A small crowd gathered, staring at the dead man on the roan. They followed at a distance and a tall, spare man with flowing mustaches pushed his way through, frowning. Duke looked down from the height of Petey's back and drawled, "Wall, wall! Yaas, indeed! My old friend, Jack Stilwell!"

The lean man stopped dead, his pale eyes narrowing. His right hand smoothed the mustaches, first one way, then the other. The annoyance deepened, making harsh lines which aged his thin face. He had a rakish air and wore his long black coat as though the day were not hot and around his soft white collar was a string tie. In his immaculate shirt front was a diamond as big as the head of a horseshoe nail, glittering white.

The discontent faded and he said in a nasal, sharp voice, "Why, it's Duke Bagley! How are you, Duke? What you mean, bringin' a corpse into Plowtown?"

Duke dismounted and shook hands. He said, "Hot day. Man oughta be buried, hadn't he?"

Stilwell went around the roan and looked. He said slowly, "Well, I'll be damned! It's Kenyon Fribold! Why, I saw him only this morning!"

Duke said, "Couple of hombres hung him. Now why should road agents hang a man? Can't get it into my thick head. Cleaned him and strung him up."

People crowded about. Stilwell said, "Fribold was one of the Mormon farmers. He sold out today. . . . There are people who don't like Mormons hereabouts. But I hate this sort of stuff, Duke, I truly do."

A pot-bellied big man with apelike arms came out of the adobe jail. He wore a star and was clean-shaven, with a moon face and staring brown eyes, like a cow. His voice boomed, "What's this? What goes on?"

Duke said, "The man's dead, Bob. D-E-A-D—dead. He can't breathe any more. He needs burying."

The sheriff looked blank, running his expressionless gaze up and down Duke's frame. Then he said colorlessly, "Oh, it's you, Bagley."

"Fine greeting after twenty years," chuckled Duke. "I'll leave the corpus delictee to you, Bob. It's prob'ly a bad idea—look out the fella don't outsmart you. Might steal your

badge or something. Even a corpse has got more brains than you, as I recollect."

Bob Take said in his dreary monotone, "I never did like you, Bagley. I never will."

"Yaas, indeed," nodded Duke. "Thank you very much." He took Jack Stilwell's arm and moved away, leaving the sheriff with the roan and its burden. Petey followed, keeping as close to Duke as possible, distrustful as always of strange people in new towns.

The crowd spread. Bob Take's voice, louder, but still toneless, called, "Stop!"

Duke stopped, murmuring, "Twice in one day! Yaas, indeed, this is rough country. Always pointin' guns at pore old Duke!"

Take said, "You're under arrest for the murder of Kenyon Fribold! Drop your guns!"

Duke grinned. "Ain't he the cute character? Yaas, indeed. Old stupid Bob."

Jack Stilwell's vibrant voice said, "Go along with him, Duke. Let him lock you up. I can't let the people see what goes on here. But I'll have you out in an hour."

Duke unbuckled his belt slowly, letting his gun fall to the ground. Take was holding a steady aim on him. Two shambling giants appeared, dull-eyed, clod-like fellows. They wore deputy's stars and looked strangely alike, but were obviously not twins. Duke surveyed them critically and decided they were equally as stupid as Bob Take.

Jack Stilwell said quietly, "Take it easy, you two. This man's a friend of mine."

The deputies cocked muddy eyes at Jack, then at Duke. One bent and picked up the gun. The other took Duke by the arm and tugged him towards the jail beyond the sheriff's office. For one second Duke saw a baleful gleam in the eyes of these two, then he was being led away.

There was a squeal, and Petey shied, lashing out a rear leg. He almost got the man bending to pick up Duke's gun, and Duke had to whistle, bringing the black horse to a querying standstill. Jack walked forward, speaking softly, and Duke said, "It's all right, my four-footed champion. Yaas, indeed. You may go with Jack."

He twisted his chin on his shoulder and saw that Petey was docile enough in Jack's skilful hands. Then the two big men were thrusting him into the jail and clanging a heavy door behind him.

He sat on a cot in the cell and regarded his surroundings. It was clean, but bare. There was no bourbon whiskey. There was only an iron cot with a straw pallet. The bars were real steel. The small window was just high enough to let the Duke glimpse a courtyard formed by the ell of the sheriff's office and a barn along the rear of the lot.

Duke fingered the Bowie between his shoulders which the peace officers had neglected to disturb. He touched the derringer in its special place in his boot-top. He was far from whipped—yet he was not at ease.

He heard Jack Stilwell's voice and went closer to the door of the cell. Jack was saying, "You're a damned booby and you ought to know better. What do you mean, arresting Duke Bagley? He's an old sidekick of mine, I tell you."

Take said stolidly, "I know Bagley. He's the smartest cut-throat ever hit the Territory. I aim to have him where I kin watch him whilst I round up a crew and go after the people who killed Fribold."

Jack's high voice said fretfully, "What about Lyman and that damned Wist and their gang?"

"They're all holed up at the Big M," said Take with satisfaction. "They pulled off their places when Fribold sold out. They were waitin' for him to bring the money in."

Stilwell said, "You've got to turn Bagley loose. He's a card player and I can use him. He's smooth, always was."

Take said, "When the posse gets back, I'll turn him a-loose."

There was a silence. Then to Duke's amazement Jack Stilwell said pacifically, "I think you're wrong, Bob. But there's a lot at stake. I'll play your way. Leave Bagley in there."

A door closed and Duke heard no more. He caught a glimpse of one of the two deputies and called out. The man lumbered forward. Duke surveyed him. The muddy eyes were wide-spaced, the pendulous lips parted. Duke said, "What do they call you, my scorpionlike friend?"

"Mescal Pete," growled the big man. "And don't forget the name." The other deputy leaned against the wall, hat over his nose, legs crossed, two guns low on his heavy thighs. Mescal Pete pointed and said, "An' he is Mescal John. An' we're both alike—tougher'n rattlesnake pizen!"

Duke said, "Fine, fine! Which one is going to buy me a bottle of bourbon whiskey to while away the hours?"

Mescal Pete held out his hand. Duke hauled out a fat pouch and clinked money into the dirty palm. Mescal John came away from the wall and said, "Get enough fer me, too."

Mescal Pete grunted, "I got enough. So long, sucker!" The two went out with Duke's money and he knew he would never see those coins again. He heard Bob Take exhorting a posse and saw the two Mescals, Pete and John, astride horses, going across the courtyard. He heard the ping of two shots and snapped back his head, plunging to the floor of the jail. He lay there as two more bullets sailed into the cell, splattered on the wall and sent showers of dust over his crouching frame. Then there were many hoofbeats as the posse rode out

and Duke came erect again. Someone, he pondered, wanted him good and dead. There had to be a reason. . . .

The jail was stout, all right. He surveyed it leisurely, noting every strong point. Then he produced his Bowie and began whittling at the base of the bars which constituted the door. He made little progress.

He sheathed the Bowie and regretfully drew the derringer. It was a chancey way to get out. He thrust it through the bars and aimed it cannily at the lock. He fired once. Nothing gave.

He waited, saving the second barrel. He dug another pair of bullets out of his boot top, in case anyone should come. He picked up the derringer, and the tricky little gun went off in his hand, without his volition, a dangerous habit of those weapons.

The bullet hit the lock from the inside as Duke involuntarily ducked. The door creaked, groaned, sagged a little. Duke stared. He put out a hand and the door swung without protest.

Duke grinned and murmured, "Wall, wall! Looks like Lady Luck's joined us at last! Yaas, indeed!" He walked through the corridor, taking his time. He was the only prisoner, which suited him fine.

He came to the sheriff's office, noted the big iron safe, carefully locked. Bob Take was the cautious sort, he knew, slow, dumb but painstaking. There was no point in searching the desk—everything important would be cached in the safe. The Duke would have loved to look inside for more reasons than one, but he tried the knob cursorily, then sauntered over to pick his gun from the rack.

He found his cartridge belt upon a hook and gathered it around his thick middle. He opened the door to the street and walked out, free as air, showing nothing of the tautness within him, hat cocked to one side, a small grin upon his somewhat dissipated countenance.

Directly before him in the gathering twilight were several figures. One was a slight, blond girl. There was a tall blond man. The third was none other than Cole Wist the tough young Texan, whose hand clutched that same big gun which had threatened Duke earlier that day.

Duke said plaintively, "Do we have to go through that old routine again?"

"No," grated Wist. "You killed Kenyon! I'm settling your hash right now!"

"My goodness," said Duke mildly. "People will be beginning to believe that I *did* kill that poor fella!"

He saw the drawn, angered faces of the others, saw the fanatical set to the tall blond man's features, let his gaze wander to the girl. He smiled, and when Duke wished, he could really turn on heat which would melt a bronze statue. He said, "But *you* don't believe it, do you, my dear?"

The girl had sharp blue eyes and a determined chin. She put her head to one side like a bird and said amazingly, "I know you didn't. It was two men. They even fired at you. Put that gun away, Cole, and act sensible. This man can help us!"

CHAPTER TWO

Death Stalks the Range

IN THE back room of the lesser of Plowtown's two general stores the four people sat and looked at one another. Cole Wist scowled and said, "Why didn't you tell us before?"

The girl said spiritedly, "When did I have time? I was riding from our house to Uncle Heber's, and I was a mile away. I saw the two men ride up the hill, saw them turn and shoot at Mr. Bagley. I only put it together awhile ago. If you men would discuss things with me, I'd be able to straighten you out. . . ."

The tall blond man, who was Heber Lyman himself, said, "Niece, methinks you are too forward. You are my sister's own child, but you take too many privileges to thyself." Heber had a sad face, with strong lines, the face of a fighter, of a dangerous, fanatical man, with deep-set eyes burning under heavy brows. He said, "Brother Bagley, they have declared a strange war upon us. This morning Brother Kenyon Fribold sold—under pressure—his ranch."

Duke said, "He did! And the thieves got the money, eh? Yaas, indeed! An old trick, but a good one—I mean a very bad one."

"The Acme Syndicate has been offering us prices below their value for our farms," said Heber Lyman. "If we do not sell, we suffer consequences."

"Such as lost stock, burnings of property, an occasional bullet from cover," nodded Duke. "Strange are the patterns of iniquity! Yaas, indeed! Strangely alike!"

Cole Wist said tightly, "There are two killers . . . dirty hangmen. They are very clever. I've been tracking them for a year, with no success. There's a clever gent behind all this. I think I could put the finger on him, all right." His eyes narrowed and he stared at Duke. He said, "Your friend, I believe, is Jack Stilwell."

Duke said, "I believed it, too. But he let me sit in that jail and get shot at." He turned to the girl and said earnestly, "Do not let it be known that you saw the two killers of Fribold. I saw them, and I have been in danger ever since."

The girl's name, it seemed, was Zoe Strang, and her father owned part of the Big M, but

lived on its far edge. Zed Strang was now at the Big M, with the other Mormons.

Heber Lyman said, "We came here seeking peace. We want only to follow our own beliefs." He hesitated, then said tautly, "I should tell you, perhaps, that we split with the Church."

Duke said, "Indeed? Interestin'!" He was watching Cole Wist and the girl. They were sparring with their eyes, he angry at her for withholding information, she irate at being reproved by her uncle.

Heber Lyman said, "We hold with Joseph and the Tablets, but we deny multiple marriages."

Duke murmured, "I should hope so! Yaas, indeed. One marriage has always seemed more than enough to me. . . ."

Wist said harshly, "And you thought a Texan couldn't be a Mormon. But I run the Big M cattle, and I'm a convert."

"Wall, wall," grinned the Duke. "You don't have to get so tough about it. Me, I'm a sorta wanderin' Methodist. I wandered so far that the church done lost me!" He beamed upon them. "I'd as soon side Mormons as any other denomination. For a price, of course!" He beamed upon them.

Cole Wist said contemptuously, "You'd condone murder, robbery, anything, if only you got your price. I know your kind. A tricky—"

Zoe Strang cut in, "Smart, unafraid fighting man! Cole is angry because Mr. Bagley beat him in a fight."

Cole Wist bellowed, "You saw that, too! You see everything and tell nothing!"

She said sweetly, "I saw you jump this man, saw him whip you. I was riding from father's."

Duke said hastily, in the interests of peace, "It was a trick, Miss Strang. Cole's much tougher than most people. . . . Tell me, Brother Heber, haven't you Mormons done good in this land?"

The blond man said, "We have delved and spun and there have been rewards, Brother Bagley. But lately all is lost. The Acme Syndicate sends the sheriff, who bargains with us. On the other side of town are the cattle ranges. The cattlemen elect Take, and do not like us because we spade the earth."

Duke said, "That I know! Yaas, indeed." He considered, shuddering a little. He was about to make a deal which would tie him up to farmers—against cattlemen! It was heresy!

He said, "But there would be some money left in your coffers, Brother Lyman?"

The blond man nodded with dignity. "Enough to pay you for finding Kenyon's murders—or to breaking up this Acme Syndicate."

"Excellent!" said Duke, rubbing his nervous hands together. "Yaas, indeed. Say—five thousand dollars?"

Again the blond man nodded, never batting an eye, and Duke knew he had made the biggest error of his career. He could have had twice, maybe three times that sum. The Acme Syndicate, whatever that was, must be throwing for big stakes, he thought. No wonder they wanted the Mormons out of the country. Not only was it difficult to compete with the careful brethren—there was a source of big money somewhere hereabouts. Farming and small cattle herds would not provide five thousand dollars for a small trouble. . . .

★

COLE WIST protested, "How do we know this man ain't a spy? He said he was a friend of Jack's. . . ."

Heber Lyman arose to his spare height. He said, "It is sometimes given to me, an humble disciple of Joseph, to see visions. This man I can read. . . . Brother Bagley is a devious person who has done many strange things. But once committed to us, he is a man who would never desert. He is a man of evil habits and associations. He is a clever rascal, probably. But in him is one great thing. Loyalty."

Duke said, "It may be, Brother Lyman. It may be! Meantime, guess we'll pretend to play with Jack Stilwell. He owns the sheriff, and you need a man in town. You got your crowd gathered, I take it?"

"Zed Strang, Gordon Smith, Orson Crowley, Nephi Rackstraw and their families are at the Big M," said Lyman. "We thought it best to stand together in our hour of travail. We have pooled—er—resources. Brother Fribold was to have brought the sale price of his farm to us. . . . There were others before Fribold, you understand, Brother Bagley."

Cole Wist said tightly, "There was John Sand, Gideon Mostrip, Acton Golightly—all Mormons, Bagley. Each was hanged—not shot. Each was robbed of all he owned."

Duke nodded. "Each by two men?"

"Or more," said Wist. "Once I saw four sets of tracks. Once there was three."

Duke said, "You're a very tough lad, Cole. You keep a watch on the Big M. Set your men on patrol. And when you get things done, come into town and look me up, only pretend not to like me." He turned to Zoe Strang as the men made ready to depart. "And you keep your eyes wide open, lovely gal, and let me know what they see."

She said, "Everyone thinks Jack Stilwell is the Acme Syndicate. The ranches they took over have been turned to grazing land for cows. But Stilwell never goes near them. They have strange men, sent down from Montana, who run them."

"Managers," nodded Duke. "Is there anything else I ought to know?"

The girl said, "We-ell, yes. It's not only the ranches. The Mormons own this store, too. It's co-operative. We buy things cheaper . . . sell only to our own kind. It's not very nice, but we are like that!" She grinned, and Duke watched her uncle's scowl, the embarrassment of Cole Wist with great amusement. She went on, "Frankly, in ten years, we'd own the whole county. Someone's out to stop us, and if they'd only fight fair I wouldn't blame them! But Cole and daddy and Uncle Heber are fire-eaters, and Cole's always in trouble. You'd better watch him close!" She turned and ran out of the room.

Duke put back his head and laughed. He chortled until the tears ran down his face. The stiff countenances of Heber Lyman and Cole Wist were scarlet. Lyman recovered first and said with dignity, "My niece is in need of discipline. Her father is a widower . . . . You will excuse us?" He turned and walked out of the store, head high.

Cole Wist said, "And I hope you stir up something quick."

Duke watched the Texan roll out with his horseman's gait and again envied the tough youthfulness of him. There was still nothing friendly in Wist's attitude.

Not that Duke minded. The Duke had a philosophy all his own. He could stand people very well—all kinds. He was gregarious, he loved gambling, drinking, loud fun. But that people thought ill of him, he realized, could never mean much, because Duke thought little of himself. He lived from day to day, surprised somewhat each morning to know he was still alive.

Duke went out into the alley next to the store and walked around the corner and came out upon Crown Street opposite the place called Jack's just as the posse rode into town behind Sheriff Bob Take and his deputies. It was growing dark and the Duke merely stood still against the corner of a building, while everyone entered Jack's.

He rolled a cigarette with consummate skill and neatness, a rare act, for he seldom smoked. He inhaled, waiting. He saw a man cross the street from Jack's and go towards the jail. The light from the Mormon store fell upon the man's face, and he recognized Jack Stilwell.

He moved rapidly, remaining on his side of Crown Street, watching Jack. His oldtime friend went into the sheriff's office, then came out again quickly. From a spot safely dark, Duke hailed, "I'm over here, Jack!"

The lean man halted and his left hand went up to stroke the flowing mustaches in the gesture Duke remembered. For a moment he did not have a muscle. Then he walked leisurely across Crown Street and came to a stop a few feet away from Duke's position. He said, "I thought you were going to get me, Duke."

"Maybe I should," said Duke. "Yaas, indeed!"

Jack said, "You'd better listen to me first."

Duke said, "Listen to any man! Always would! Yaas!"

Jack said, "Behind my place?"

"Yaas," said Duke. "Behind the store, not the bar."

Duke walked around to the rear of the jail. He examined the barn he had noted, and the the corral. There were several fine horses therein. Duke saw Petey in a stall and went in to find his saddle. He rummaged about, got the hull and threw it on Petey's back. He led the horse out and went down the back lots toward the dim bulk of Jack's building.

At the rear of the store was a light. He left Petey standing, reins trailing. He murmured, "Might have to make a fast getaway, my ebony rascal. You stay right here. Might be very interestin'. Yaas, indeed."

He walked up on a porch, stepping on tip toes. He pushed at the door with his right hand, so that it swung open. His right hand drew the long-barreled Colt's and he said, "Hold everything, you two-bit devils!"

Jack Stilwell sat behind a flat table and did not move nor change expression. Sheriff Bob Take and his two evil-looking deputies half-raised their arms and leaned against the far wall. Duke closed the door behind him.

He said, "All right, who talks?"

FOR a moment the silence was thick. Then Jack Stilwell said, "You can put up your gun. Bob don't mean any harm."

Take said in his flat voice, "You didn't kill Fribold. I got no reason to worry you."

Duke slid the gun gently back into its holster and bestrode a straight chair. He said, "All right, Jack. Spill it, my fine friend."

Stilwell stroked his mustaches and took a deep breath. He said, "Duke, the Mormons have moved in on us. Remember how we fought them, back in Utah?"

"Yaas," said Duke. "Danites."

Jack said, "They're takin' business away from me. They're bringin' in relatives every week. They'll beat Bob next election if things keep up. The cattlemen are goin' to run them out."

Duke said, "By hangin' them, one at a time?"

Jack scowled. "You know me, Duke. I'm a gambler and a businessman, no hangman!"

Duke said, "Then who are—the cattlemen?"

The sheriff moved away from the wall. He said, "Could you find out who's doin' it?"

Duke said, "For five thousand dollars."

Bob Take cursed. "You're crazy!"

"I haven't got that much," said Jack ruefully.

Duke pocketed the balls. He said, "In that case, gents, I'll tackle the job."

They stared at him, open-mouthed. Take said, "You *are* crazy, Bagley. And I don't believe you'll ever find them killers. They're too smart. And if a U.S. marshal comes down to investigate, and finds out we—"

Jack said sharply, "Never mind that. I'll cut you in on my game tables and let you make what you can. Is that fair?"

Duke said, "Yaas, indeed, my old-time mate. I'm to find the killers of Kenyon Fribold and the other Mormons."

"Right!" said Jack. His face cleared and he seemed vastly relieved. "I want you on our side, Duke. Clear up this mystery and we'll handle the Mormons."

Duke said, "Yaas. Very well." He let his glance rove over Mescal Pete and Mescal John. "And keep these left-footed damned dummies out of my way. I don't like them."

He saw the murky glance exchanged between the deputies, then Take said, "Nobody'll bother you, except the Mormons and—the killers."

"That suits me," said Duke cheerfully. "So-long, gents. . . . And Jack—I'm helping myself to some liquor from your place."

Jack went with him, allowing the sheriff to sneak off along the back lots to the jail. He handed over two quarts of bourbon. Duke swung aboard Petey and looked down. He said, "Bob Take is your man, and the two troglodytes work for him. But how do you stand on that trio?"

Jack said, "You find out where I should stand, will you?"

"Yaas, indeed," said Duke, with satisfaction. "That I will do! See you later, Jack."

He rode out and spent the night on the road, wrapped in his blankets, watching the stars far into the morning hours. He slept until noon and there was only one bottle of whiskey left when he awoke. He had still to eat, so struck off vigorously and came to the first of the cow ranches. It was the Jaybird, and he spent the afternoon lolling about, telling great tales to the cook and the wrangler. Later he talked with Hob Forteen, the owner. . . .

"Nobody's bothering me," said Forteen, a tough, gnarled oldtimer. "Us cattlemen mind our own business. We got range enough. The damned Mormons are no good and never will be, and they run sheep, the sons—but that's over on the Mehila. We stay east of Plowtown and mind our own business."

Duke said, "Who owns the Acme Syndicate?"

The cattleman scratched his head. "Never heerd of that outfit, Bagley. Sounds like a bunch of Eastern dudes."

Duke said, "Thanks. You've been a big help. Yaas, indeed. . . . I s'pose the other ranchers feel about the same?"

"Had a meetin' last week," said Forteen frankly. "I'm expressin' the upshot of opinion."

"Yaas," said Duke warmly. "I can see you're right."

Forteen said shrewdly, "If you're workin' for the Mormons, tell them we got no quarrel with 'em, as long as they stay on the Mehila River and mind their own business. And if they spoil Jack Stilwell's business, that's not our affair." His wise, sun-faded blue eyes crinkled and he stared long at Duke. Then he nodded, winked and went back into the house.

Duke rode Petey back towards Plowtown.

Men boiled out of Jack's place as he dismounted and there were loud cries and the sound of blows. Duke stepped back to the shelter of the post which held up the wooden awning and watched. He saw Mescal Pete and Mescal John, working as a team, methodically whacking at a man who sailed back and forth between them like a football. It was a moment before Duke recognized the victim as Cole Wist.

It took another moment for him to realize that Cole was drunk. He saw Bob Take and Jack in the doorway, looking on.

Then Duke slipped through the crowd and came behind Mescal Pete.

HE TOOK the big man by the shirt, moved him off balance. He lifted and tripped with his toe, shoving Pete. He saw John start for him, and he bent, letting the other Mescal go over his back. He straightened and his gun was in his hand.

He said mildly, "Two to one ain't fair. Yaas, indeed. This lad looks like he could fight 'em one at a time."

Jack said quickly, "Butt out, Duke."

Cole Wist was sobering, his nose bloody, his shirt torn. He looked from Duke to Stilwell, wonderingly. He opened his mouth to speak, and spat out a tooth. He closed his mouth again and blindly reached for his hat where it had fallen on the street. He staggered to a horse at the rail, unhitched and rode westward.

Jack came close and said, "That renegade came here and started a fight. Claimed we were all hanging his friends. He drank about a quart, then started in on us. The boys had to take him."

"Wall, wall," said Duke. "Accused yawl, eh? He don't look like no Mormon."

"He's hot after Zed Strang's daughter," said Jack. "So he joined 'em."

"Do tell!" said Duke. "Got to have some more bourbon, Jack. Ran clean out today."

"What did you learn?" asked Jack eagerly.

"Not a thing," said Duke cheerfully. "Aim to ride out and talk to the Mormons."

"You can't!" said Jack. "They're holed up at the Big M, scared and ready to shoot."

"Just saved one of 'em, didn't I?" asked Duke innocently. "Boy'll put in a good word for me, I hope!"

Jack Stilwell stepped back and regarded the Duke. He said slowly, "You're cute, all right. But I don't know. . . ."

Across the way the two deputies were standing on either side of the sheriff, who was pacifying them. They kept glancing at Duke as though they aimed to continue the hostilities. Duke said, "I see you haven't got straight on those hombres. Need a house-cleanin', don't you, Jack? Beatin' a man up like that . . . don't hold with it!"

He walked into the saloon and plucked two more bottles from behind the bar. He came out and stowed them carefully in the saddlebag. He said loudly, "Watch yourself, Jack. I'm sleepin' at the hotel, if you need me."

He put Petey up for the night and retired to a room in the hotel. Then he moved quickly out and went by back ways to the Mormon store. He slid up an alley he remembered and watched across the street until the lights of Jack's place went out. In the sheriff's office a lamp still burned, but while he waited it too was extinguished.

He walked across the dark street, going lightly, his hand on his gun. He came around to the rear of Jack's place and blinked, staring, his heart in his throat. He saw the figure dangling from the gable end of Jack's roof and for a moment he thought it was Cole Wist.

He went closer, then jerked back upon instinct. He saw figures moving. He heard the click of a hammer and dove for safety.

He landed under the porch as the guns opened up. There were at least three, maybe more, but he could not determine whether one man was handling two weapons. He lay still.

His eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness and he almost could distinguish one large man who hid ineffectually behind a clothes pole. Then there were voices from the street and approaching lights. The big man turned and fled, and he was wearing black, all right, just like the pair who had hung Kenyon Fribold and escaped into the hills. Duke lay quite still and pondered the fact that there weren't two all-chestnut horses in the town.

Yet here, before him, was another piece of rope work. The Mormon, he had seen—and now this.

He crawled out from under the porch in time to greet Bob Take, who was carrying a lantern. The sheriff said, "They get you?"

Mescal John loomed, squinting his dislike of Duke. After a moment Mescal Pete, half asleep, struggling into a buckskin vest, came down the alley and joined them, blocking off the curious until the officers came.

The lantern cast dancing rays. Bob Take was shaking. Duke looked long and hard at the swinging figure. Then he said softly, "I knew him good, years ago. He was a square-shootin' gambler. Squarer than me, mebby."

The figure swung a bit and Duke shivered. The face of Jack Stilwell looked broodingly down. His countenance was not distorted, the tongue did not protrude. Duke took the lantern and mounted the porch rail.

He saw that Jack had been strung up with manila rope. The dead gambler's neck had been broken, by the odd angle of his head.

But he studied the rope carefully. Then he thrust the lantern close to Jack's face and examined the jaw. He made himself spin the corpse around, then looked at the back of Jack's head. He saw that Jack's diamond stud was gone.

Then he climbed down and handed the lantern to Take. He said, "It's all yours, Sheriff. My mind's made up."

Take said, "Wh-what'd you find out?"

Duke said, "You're the sheriff, my fat-brained, pot-bellied friend!"

He was suddenly in a great hurry. He caught up Petey at the hotel and started immediately westward towards the Big M.

CHAPTER THREE

The Duke's Gun-Gamble

THE Big M ranch house was large, clean, airy and bare. The furnishings were severe and only the curtains at the windows and a few pitiful potted geraniums gave sign of feminine occupancy. The women were out of sight and sound, probably in the west wing, an ell which extended sharply to the rear of the main building. Duke sat in a rawhide bottom chair and was uncomfortable.

Heber Lyman dominated the group like a Titan. There was mousey Zed Strang, his brother-in-law, gaunt Gordon Smith who smouldered but was silent; chattering, futile Orson Crowley, gigantic Nephi Rackstraw, a somnolent but muscular man who stayed close to Heber, worshipping the leader. There was Cole Wist, bruised, sullen and somehow restless and unhappy.

Duke said, "If Jack Stilwell was the Acme Syndicate, your troubles are over. Jack was hanged tonight."

The response was electric. Heber said, "May his soul rest in peace!"

Then silence fell. Duke said blandly, "You don't owe me much. Haven't found your mur-

derers. Thought you might know something .... Where's the gal, Zoe?"

Heber sighed. "Locked up. Discipline, Brother Bagley."

"Bread and water?" asked Duke. "Girl's smart. Want to talk to her."

"It is forbidden," said Heber sadly. "Solitude is her penance. She knows nothing, for she has not been at large. I think you may consider the case closed, Brother Bagley. With the demise of Jack Stilwell, we feel safe." He looked around and the Mormons all nodded, but Cole Wist scowled.

Duke said, "Yaas, indeed! And my time?"

"The bargain," said Heber carefully, "was that you produce the accursed hangmen."

"Yaas," murmured the Duke. "It was, wasn't it?"

Cole Wist said, "The man's entitled to his time."

"Thanks," said Duke. "But it's quite all right. Yaas, indeed. Forget it. Glad to be of service." He smiled his winning smile at them and arose. He shook hands with each, gripping their palms hard. He went outdoors to where Petey was turned into the corral, as they had expected Duke to stay. Cole Wist followed him.

Out of hearing of the house, the Texan said, "Bagley, I've got to trust you."

"My robust young friend," said Duke, "it is about time."

"Things is queer," said Wist hastily. "Zoe knows something and she's scared. They got her locked up and I don't like it."

"How many men are out here?" asked Duke.

"About twenty hands. The rest quit, but these are all Mormons, working for those fellas inside," said Cole. "Up until today I got along with 'em. Yesterday they made me mad and I got drunk and went to town—you saw what happened. Today they won't talk to me, won't take an order. I'm scared that they're gettin' ready to move on the town. They been persecuted, all right, and Mormons allus fight back, Bagley."

"Yaas, indeed," muttered Bagley. "I remember. So would Jack." He was silent, thinking. For two days he had been aware that part of the puzzle of the hangings had been in his mind. Now he thought he had the rest of it. There had been a mistake.

He said rapidly, "You keep sayin' 'they'. I guess you ain't rightly a Mormon, at that."

"I aimed to be," said Cole Wist stubbornly. "But they've locked up the gal."

"Yaas," said the Duke. "I see." He went into the corral and whistled and Petey came to him. He stroked the black horse's nose, pondering. Then he said, "Catch up a couple of nags. Which window is hers?"

Cole said, "That one. Last on the wing."

Duke nodded. Leading Petey, he went once around the house. He could see the cowhands in their quarters, playing coon-can and seven up, reading and sleeping. There was no set guard around the house. In the front room the Mormons had their heads together, circled about Heber Lyman.

Duke came all the way to where he had started, saw that Cole had the horses ready. He left Petey standing, went silently to the window Cole had pointed out. He tapped lightly.

There was no light, but he could make out the dim outline of the girl's white face. She made motions, indicating that the window was locked. Duke strove with it for a moment, noting with satisfaction that the girl was whirling into garments of some sort. When she was ready, he crashed the glass.

It made an awful clatter, but it took precious time to clear away the fragments of the nailed window. Then she came through, lightly and willingly, saying, "Is Cole all right? Have you found out about them?"

"Not all of it," said Duke. "No, indeed. But here's Cole, and here come the Mormons!"

She leaped for the horse. Cole, already mounted, seized her elbow and she made a perfect flying mount. Duke lifted his gun and fired a warning shot, and the men scattered.

Then a rifle crashed from the front and that meant business. Duke clambered into the saddle and Petey began to run. They swerved, and Cole set out for town, pushing Zoe Strang ahead. Duke shouted, "Go to the sheriff! I'll meet you there."

He swung about, shooting his sixgun without aim, drawing the fire of the embattled Mormons. He made a complete circle, doubling in his tracks. He heard the shouts, saw men saddling up and start spurring away.

Then Zed Strang sprang forward and said, "You fired at risk of hitting my girl! I won't have this, I tell you!"

From somewhere another shot rang out. Zed Strang clasped at his chest, keeled over upon his face. Duke caught his breath. Then the Mormons were riding; the house was silent.

Duke dismounted and cautiously went in. The women were so well disciplined that not one of them appeared. Duke crept into the large room and found an ornate, carved desk. With his Bowie he pried at the lock.

He went through the pigeon holes, the drawers. He ran his delicate, sensitive gambler fingers along the edges of the desk top, noting a discrepancy of space, after all cubicles were considered. He discovered a secret drawer.

He emptied the contents with scarcely a glance at them. He had found what he wanted —money and precious stones. He hoped it would total up to five thousand dollars. He

chuckled, going out and climbing upon Petey and riding into the hills.

Once again he had scored his point and collected his price. He knew full well who the hangmen were. It was merely a matter of sending a letter from a faraway place and telling what he had conjectured, plus what he knew. His fee was then earned.

But there were other matters. There was Cole Wist, who loved Zoe Strang, who was in danger of extermination for guessing too much. A clever girl, reared by clever people, Duke ruminated, riding the rim of the hills.

And there had been Jack Stilwell. . . . The memory of that dangling body made Duke's fists clench involuntarily, so that Petey shied at the tug upon the bit in his mouth.

Duke said soothingly, "Don't you fret, Petey, my black-hided, great-hearted steed. Nobody's aimin' to hurt you. It's another thing, my friend. Stealin' is one thing, crooked gamblin' another, drinkin' bourbon maybe another—although I never did see the harm in drinkin'. But hangin's a thing a man can't stand without sickenin' inside him. Let's go to Plowtown, Petey!"

THE Mormons were milling through the town. Heber Lyman had cautioned them against indiscriminate shooting, and as no one opposed them, at first they were aimless, wandering Crown Street.

Heber Lyman said, "Stilwell's man is the one we must take. The sheriff—and his deputies."

They surged forth and found Bob Take in his office. They seized him, disarmed him and tied him up. Searching for a meeting place, they decided that the most spacious accommodations were in Jack's bar. They opened the place and burned the lights brightly. They put Bob Take on a chair and lashed him tight to it. Heber Lyman presided, and they selected a jury, prosecutor and defender.

The process was slow, but finally the trial got under way. Nephi Rackstraw lumbered in and announced that the two Mescals had disappeared. He said, "But I seen Zoe and Brother Cole."

Heber said sharply, "You didn't bring them with you?"

"You didn't say to," said Nephi abashedly. "And they was ridin' fast. Goin' west, they was. Some of our men'll run into them."

Heber bit at his thin lip. His deep eyes burned in their hollow sockets. He said sonorously, "Proceed with the trial of Sheriff Robert Take, charged with misfeasance, malfeasance and nonfeasance in office."

At last, nearing midnight, Heber Lyman pronounced the sentence. "You will be taken by the brethren to the nearest tree and—hanged by the neck until you are dead."

They were leading him out. A rope was produced and the townspeople cowered in their houses, watching their duly elected peace officer being led to his death. Torches flared.

There was the sound of pounding hoofs. Down Crown Street came two horsemen, bending low, spurring chestnut steeds. They wore black shirts and black sombreros.

Following closely, so close that no one thought to shoot, was the Duke on Petey. In the gloved, narrow hands a rope twirled, cowhand style, as Duke leaned forward, his face set. Almost abreast came Cole Wist on a sprinting paint pony, and in the rear rode Zoe Strang, her blonde hair flying, a sixgun balanced in her hand, her blue eyes sparkling like a Brunhilde.

Heber Lyman called, "Shoot them! There are our enemies!"

Duke balanced himself. It had been years since he had thrown a rope, and he was not too sure of his aim. But he had a special reason for doing it this way. He had not touched his gun since he had headed off the two black-clad horsemen making their way so hastily from the country. He had chivvied them, ridden out their backward-fired guns until they were out of ammunition.

Cole Wist emitted a *yippee,* and the Duke made his cast. The rope snaked out, fell limp and with seeming inoffensiveness. Its coil dropped about the bent shoulders of the man to the left. The other beat at his horse in frantic fear. Petey, feeling the rope settle, braced himself sliding to a stop. The man was jerked from the saddle.

Cole Wist followed Duke's example one second later. His victim flew through the air and rolled into the dirt. The girl rode in, standing in her stirrups, waiting, silent, her eyes going among the assemblage.

Duke looked down at Bob Take. He said, "Got 'em! Looks like I'm just in time."

Heber Lyman was edging forward. His resonant voice cried, "What is the meaning of this, Brother Bagley?"

The Mormons crowded, staring. Cole was dragging the battered victims to the walk. Mescal Pete and Mescal John were half-conscious, leaning against one another.

Duke said, "A little rope work. Appropriate, indeed! Thought I'd bring the hangmen to you, Brother Heber."

Nephi Rackstraw was standing nearest the two deputies, and Heber walked to where he faced the prisoners. He said, "Ah, Brother Bagley, I see you have them. The black shirts! The black hats."

Nephi seemed to start, leaned closer to Heber Lyman. Cole Wist was crouched to Duke's left, his hands outspread, a look of infinite hate on his face. The Mormons still were uncertain, but several of the tougher

cowhands were pulling apart from the main body. Duke counted them, but had to spend precious time cutting Bob Take loose, thrusting a purloined gun into the sheriff's hand.

Heber Lyman said, "Have you proof against these men, Brother Bagley? . . . . What is this? You are freeing a condemned man! The sheriff already stands convicted! Surely his evil deputies are not more guilty than he!"

Duke said, "You can really palaver, Brother Heber. Reckon you're the king-pin palaverer in these parts. You're a rich old ruler. The brethern really need you!"

Zoe, from the horse's back, had the best view. She cried suddenly, "Look out!"

Her gun barked and a cowhand at the rear of the Mescal pair dropped back, cursing. But Mescal John and Mescal Pete moved, and the ropes fell from them.

At the same instant Nephi Rackstraw drew two sixguns and began shooting. Confusion reigned supreme for that moment, taking Duke by surprise.

Cole Wist began banging away. He was a stalwart young Texan, Duke thought, drawing his own gun with that lightning speed which had made so many gasp. Mescal Pete was aiming at Cole. Duke said, "One for Jack!" He shot from a steady aim. Mescal Pete piled to the ground.

Something rose in Duke, different than the spirit which he had carried to so many gun battles. The ruthlessness of what had gone before, the consummate villainy of the parties concerned, the cold-blooded hanging of men had made him fierce. He deliberately shot Mescal John in the shoulder, then in the other arm, saving him for a rope's noose.

Duke said, "I've got this one!" and stepped forward as the huge Nephi, bawling with rage, leaped to avenge his master. Straight into the fire of both guns stepped the Duke, his gun steady, sighting along the barrel, holding his wrist loose, pressing on the trigger as though shooting a round at a target.

Lead tore through his loose-swinging, fancy vest. He fired again. Nephi still came, his guns lowered, his momentum carrying him, both weapons still spitting fire. Duke belted him with the muzzle of his Colt and let him fall with a crash at Bob Take's feet.

Zoe was crying, "Stop! You'll all kill one another! Stop and listen!"

Cole Wist was upon the porch of Jack's place, shouting, "The leaders are down! No use to fight now! Stop!"

Duke blew through the barrel of his gun and said, "Yaas, indeed. It's all over. Yonder comes Hob Forteen and enough cattlemen to wipe us all out!"

The grizzled cowman rode in and hostilities abruptly stopped. Cole Wist stood beside the Duke and said, "We've about cleaned it."

Duke said, "Not quite. Jack's body, hangin' back there, still haunts me when I close my eyes. . . ."

CHAPTER FOUR

Justice, a la Duke Bagley!

THEY were all sitting or standing about Jack's place, and the Duke was talking. The cattlemen listened. Heber Lyman, his face grave, stood against the bar at the end. Zoe Strang, pale but composed, sat close to Cole Wist.

Duke said, "First off, I knew it wasn't Jack Stilwell who was hangin' the farmers because Jack couldn't even begin to pay me what I asked. Therefore he didn't have all that money which was stolen. Of course, I'd seen the killers, and when I also saw Mescal Pete and Mescal John I knew it was prob'ly them. . . ."

The farmers stirred, glaring at Mescal John, the only survivor. The glowering big man tried to speak, but Duke went hastily on.

"The thing was, to my mind, to find who those lunks were workin' for. So I played around with all parties. People kept takin' shots at me, and I know Jack Stilwell and Bob Take were figurin' that the murders didn't do their business any harm—but I couldn't see either of these old-timers stringin' men up. Guns was always our way. Yaas, indeed. . . . It was Mescal Pete and Mescal John who shot at me. They thought I'd seen 'em good."

His eye wandered about the assembled men. He sighed and tipped a bottle to his lips. He twisted uncomfortably and said, "Gettin' old. Guess I'll have to take off the belt. Safe enough in here, I reckon." He grinned and removed his heavy cartridge belt and sixgun, placing them on the end of the bar. He placed his right foot upon a straight chair leaned an elbow upon his knee and went on:

"Hangin' Fribold to get his money was one thing. Hangin' Jack Stilwell because Jack was beginnin' to get onto the two Mescals was another. . . . In the first place, they hit Jack first and broke his neck. You'll find a bruise on Jack's chin. Then the stupid devils thought it would confuse people if they hung him, so they put a rope around poor Jack's neck after he was dead and hauled him up over that ridge pole. You can see on the hemp rope that the strands are not strained or broken as they would be if they dropped him. . . ."

Hob Forteen said, "You been there before, Bagley. That's smart."

"Yaas, indeed," smiled the Duke. "So they took Jack's diamond stud, and ran to their boss with it. He paid them and told them to get out of the country. But they had to come back and pack their stuff, includin' some cash and loot—didn't you, Mescal John?"

The big man snapped, "I got plenty to say when you get done."

Duke went on, "I always was agin Bob Take, but I knew he didn't hang Jack. Up until that, I wasn't sure. Bob stood to get beat out of his job. . . . But he wouldn't pull a thing like that on Jack, and besides, he was there almost as quick as me—but the Mescals were a bit later. They had plenty of time. They did it, all right."

He grew very grim. He leaned an elbow heavily on his knee and said, "But someone ordered them to do it. Zoe Strang, whose pappy was just killed out at the Bar M because he objected and because he owned part of the Bar M—Zoe knows. Cole knows who he is. Nephi Rackstraw knew, and a few of the others, but they got themselves killed awhile back, out there on the street."

Hob Forteen said slowly, "I'm beginnin' to see. . . ."

"Yaas," murmured the Duke. "Yaas, indeed. A sort of hanging master. A man who wants to scare away his neighbors, his own kin, everyone. A greedy man, a devil incarnate. The Acme Syndicate man, usin' the bank as a blind and an Eastern mailin' address. A man to decorate the end of a rope himself, within a very short time. Yaas, indeed!"

A HAND was feverishly snatching at Duke's sixgun, where Duke had left it at the end of the bar. So quick was it, and so absorbed had everyone been in Duke's tale, that it seemed that the attempt could not miss. The old Colt, gleaming and deadly, came around and bore upon its owner. Cole Wist and the girl cried out and sprang, but knew they were too late.

The Duke did not flinch. His right hand darted down. From the top of his stylish stitched boots he plucked with his clever nimble fingers the small derringer.

He fired without aiming, fired the second barrel. Then he stepped aside and saw his own gun discharged into the floor. He kept going, swinging his fists.

The derringer bullet had slapped into Heber Lyman's arm, spoiling his aim. Duke's fist caught him and drove him, and Duke's left hand plucked the gun away.

Heber's mouth opened, his face, drained of color, was a mask of hatred and rage and fear and then Duke slammed home a pole-axe right fist and Heber Lyman collapsed as five men hurtled forward to take hold of him.

Hob Forteen said gravely, "You can prove this?"

Duke reached into his vest and took out Jack Stilwell's diamond stickpin.

He said, "I found it in Lyman's desk. The girl suspected him—she can tell you more. Cole Wist became aware of things recently. Listen to him. And I believe Mescal John is ready to talk. . . . Nephi was in on it, and some others."

Hob Forteen said, "We could use the same rope they put around Jack's neck. . . ."

"That," said Duke heavily, "would help a little."

Lyman was already tied. His head was high and the light still burned in him, and his glare should have scorched Duke Bagley. But Duke, feeling a little old, and very weary, walked out the door.

Inside there would be another, briefer trial.

Zoe and Cole Wist, standing together, were ready to testify. They made a fine pair and the Bar M would be fine property, even after paying back the losses of the honest Mormons who had suffered under the depredations of their demoniac leader.

Bob Take waddled out. He said, "As sheriff I can't be in on it. . . . but I'll hide and watch 'em hang them!"

Duke said, "Don't blame you, Bob."

Take said, "Reckon you got a right to the tables in Jack's place. Long as you want them. Jack didn't have no heirs. Him and me were supposed to split even. I'd be proud to have you as partner, Duke."

It was a fair offer. All his life Duke had sworn to quit the trail when a nice gambling spread and saloon could be had for quick and easy taking. It was a good town. The Mormons were all-right people when the culls like Heber Lyman were chucked out.

Duke said, "Thanks, Bob. Mighty white of you. Mebbe I should take your offer. But I got to ride."

He shook hands briefly, then touched spur to Petey. Bob called, "You ain't waitin' for the hangin'?"

Duke waved his hand, heading west. He was of no mind to witness another hanging. He muttered, "I'd be bound to stop it. . . . Even Heber Lyman! Never could stand seein' a man choked to death." He put fingers to his throat, tenderly, thinking of the times he had narrowly escaped such an end. Those were uncomfortable memories.

He reached into his pocket and touched the wadded currency, the fat pouch of coins. He would have to stop by the Bar M and count it. Wouldn't do to cheat Cole and the gal, he told himself. Anything over five thousand he would leave at the ranch for them. . . .

Regretfully he reflected that there would be no whiskey at the ranch, as the Mormons of this group were dry.

Then he remembered that Heber Lyman was a renegade Mormon. He grinned and urged Petey a little faster. He could certainly use a little bourbon. . . .

THE END

When a bushwhacker knocked out Johnny Payne and swapped clothes with him, Johnny never guessed that he'd inherited—along with a set of dude duds and a bump on the head—a frontier newspaper job that would give him first, exclusive rights to an unmarked grave!

CHAPTER ONE

Welcome to Hellfire!

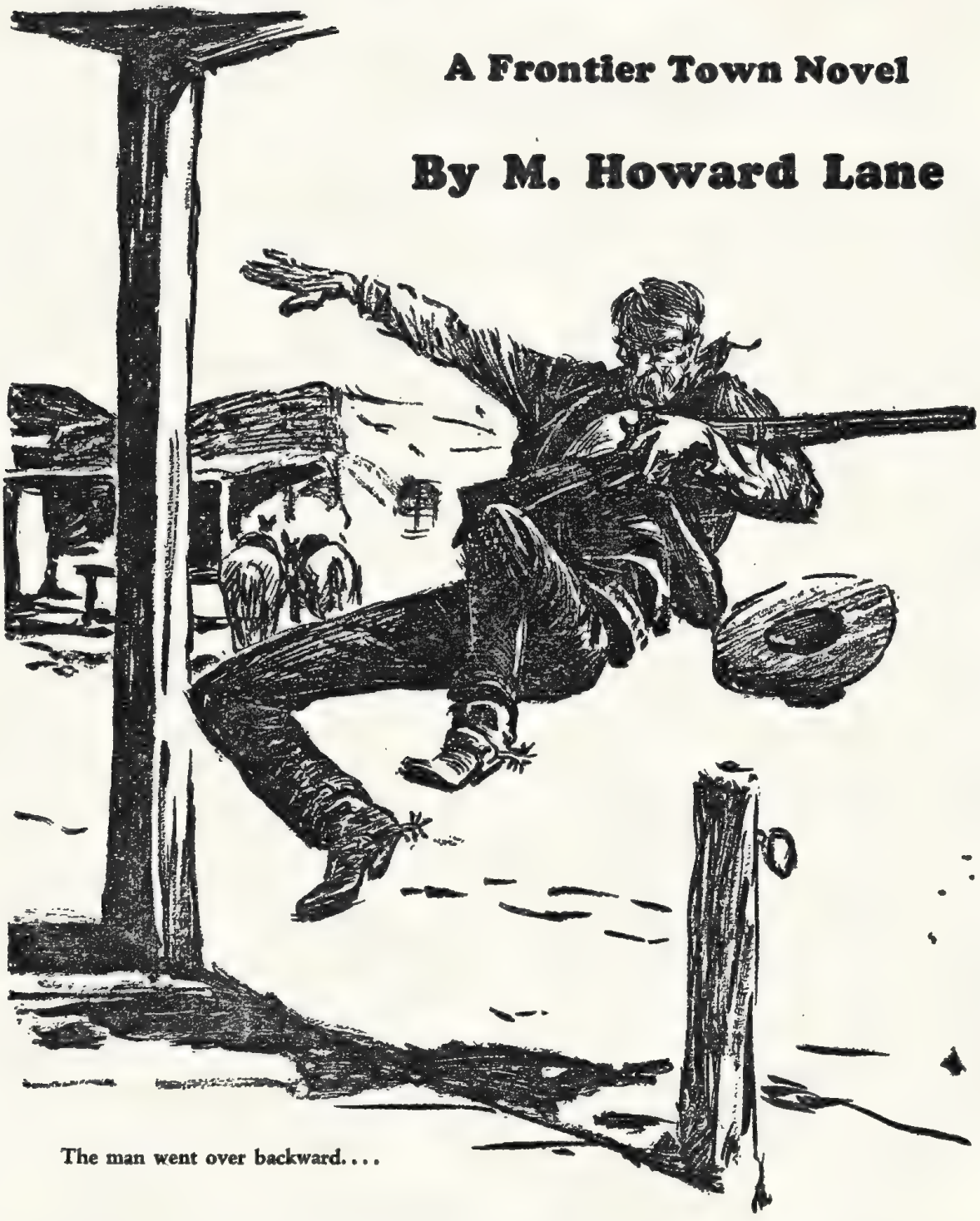
JOHNNY PAYNE woke with a headache that seemed ready to split his skull. He opened one eye experimentally, and morning sunlight speared him.

"Lord!" Johnny groaned the single word. He hadn't touched a drop of whiskey since the boss had paid off his round-up crew out on the San Francisco plateau the week before. Most of the men had turned north toward Prescott and the delights of that town,

WRITES IN BLOOD! ★

A Frontier Town Novel

By M. Howard Lane



The man went over backward....

and they'd rawhided Johnny some when he'd told them that he was going to cut west to the Hassayampa, and keep what pay he had in his pocket.

He was, he had told them, going to take life easy for awhile and let a wrenched knee heal. A little town called Fidelity lay along the banks of the Hassayampa, he had heard, and it sounded like just the place for a man to rest up for a while.

He had reached the Hassayampa the night before, Johnny recalled, caught himself a nice mess of trout, and set camp in a little pine-circled flat. He'd cooked and eaten the

fish and gone to bed with a free conscience Now he was awake—and he felt like he'd been on a week-long drunk. Experimentallv, Johnny raised one hand to his forehead. It came away sticky. He looked at his fingers, and the sight of red blood on them was enough to jerk his other eye open, and push him upright in his blankets.

Grulla, his rangy claybank, nickered a morning greeting from his picket rope in lush grass at the edge of camp, but Johnny Payne was paying him no attention, for his swimming gaze had focused on the foot of his bed. The night before he had removed his boots and pants, shirt and holstered Colt and stacked them there. Now a neatly folded blue suit and white shirt lay in their place. His boots, Johnny saw, were as he'd left them, but his Colt was gone.

"Now, me," said Johnny Payne, "I'll be damned!"

He touched his aching head again, gingerly. Somebody had stolen into camp while he slept, it was easy to see. They had hit him over the head just to make sure that he kept right on sleeping, and then they'd proceeded to exchange clothes with him.

Johnny looked at the blue suit with distaste. Whether it fit or not, he'd have to put it on. He'd thrown away all of his old duds, figuring to buy some new ones in Fidelity.

That made him think of the five months' pay that had been in his pants pocket, and he left his blankets as though a hot coal had been shoved under them. His wallet was there, between the white shirt and folded suit, and its contents were intact.

"I'll be damned again," Johnny Payne said aloud. "Now why in hell would a cuss steal my pants and gun and hat and leave my dinero behind?"

He was still asking himself the same question after soaking his head in the Hassayampa, and the answer was one he couldn't fathom. A powdering of white dust lay in the folds of the suit. Johnny brushed it off and stepped into the pants and shirt. They fit his rangy six-foot length satisfactorily, but he felt naked without his gun.

Cold river-water and black coffee had combined to drive most of the ache from his head by the time Grulla was saddled, and his pack settled behind the cantle. A last glance at the pine needles covering the flat showed Johnny that trying to track the marauder would be a waste of time.

"Cuss probably hit for the stage road," he decided, and pushed Grulla from the gorge of the Hassayampa. The dust of the thoroughfare, when he reached it, held tracks aplenty, but a man couldn't decided which belonged to the horseman who had stolen his clothes and gun.

Johnny shook his head, and turned to the right toward Fidelity. He was still conscious of his empty hip. "First thing I'll do when I hit that town," he promised himself, "is run me an ad for a second-hand sixgun, if they got a newspaper. I sure and certain ain't going to spend the dinero for a new one!"

The town might also provide some solution to his missing pants and weapon, Johnny hoped. He paused an hour later at the head of the stage road dipping down into the bowl where Fidelity basked in the Arizona sun. From this distance, the town looked like many another combination mining-camp and cowtown his fiddle-footed wanderings had carried him into during the last half-dozen years.

Shaft houses raised their gaunt lengths above deep mines, and from down along the Hassayampa to the west he could hear the ceaseless *champ, champ* of stamp mills.

The high plateau stretching south and east was cattle-country, and on pay day Johnny guessed Fidelity was probably a right lively place, with miners and cowpokes eyeing each other like dogs looking over the same bone.

A double click from the slope to the left of the road disturbed his thoughts. It sounded suspiciously like a gun-hammer coming to full cock. Johnny Payne swung his head, and he didn't like what he saw.

★

A BIG, brawny man with the arrogant eyes of a tyrant had risen from behind some tawny boulders there. He was leaning across the top of them now, and the careless way he held the Colt in his right hand didn't fool Johnny. His open leather vest and the fancy plaid shirt he wore marked him for a cattleman.

For a moment he surveyed Johnny Payne in silence, taking in the cowpoke from touseled sun-faded hair to Bluchers. Johnny kept expression from his long face, but he was wondering why Fidelity needed gunguards to watch her roads.

The man behind the rocks spoke suddenly. "All right, boys," he called, "come and look this 'un over. He's wearin' dude clothes—probably another applicant for the job them O'Shea women got to offer. Don't lift them reins feller!" he added warningly.

Johnny watched three riders appear from behind other boulders on the slope siding the stage road. He glanced forward. A bend twenty yards ahead would hide him once he got around it.

"I ain't never liked gents who p'int guns at people!" Johnny drawled, and his heels raked back into Grulla's flanks. The big claybank was a trained cutting horse, ready to

run at the touch of spurs. He leaped ahead. Johnny leaned forward across the pommel of his saddle, as the brawny hombre's shout of surprise sounded behind him.

A bullet followed the shout. It struck the outthrust ridge around which the road curved, ricocheting with an ugly whine. The bend hid him then, and a slow anger started to kindle in Johnny Payne's chest. Evidently there was open season on gents wearing dude-suits!

"I get me a gun, I'll change their tune!" Johnny promised himself.

He kept Grulla to a run, curve after looping curve falling behind him as he dropped down the road toward Fidelity. High chaparral grew on the flat this side of the town, and riders swirled from it to block the road as Payne swept to the foot of the grade.

Johnny counted six in this bunch, and sheer surprise as much as necessity made him rein in. This was evidently another reception committee, of a different caliber than the ones he'd left behind. Miners, from the look of them, unaccustomed to sitting a saddle. Their obvious leader was a broad chunk of a man dressed a little better than the rest. His eyes were a pale blue, sharp as drill steel in his smooth-shaven, beefy face.

"Here's another one," he drawled to his crew. "Get busy."

Johnny Payne felt the emptiness of his hip, and cursed to himself. Then another curious thing happened. The beat of hoofs descending the grade came through the morning hush, and Johnny saw the leader of the mining outfit stare past him.

"Carter," the man said briefly. "Vamoose!"

As the riders had come, so they disappeared into the brush. Johnny Payne blinked at the empty roadway in front of him, then he touched Grulla with his spurs, beginning to wonder what would happen next. He looked down at the blue pants, which had gathered a faint film of white dust, the same hue as he'd found on it originally.

"So the cuss who cracked me and traded clothes came from this here Fidelity," Johnny ruminated. "Now wouldn't that skin a dog! If this is the way people treated him around here, I don't blame him for wanting to change pants. But he might of left my my Colt. I've got a feeling I'm going to need one!"

Fidelity was about as he had expected. There were the usual number of false-fronted emporiums of pleasure, the rival general stores, a blacksmith shop, a solid-looking bank building, two hotels that by title expressed their preferences for miners or cattlemen—and at the opposite end of the street a sagging clapboard shanty with the name *Fidelity Free-Press* blazoned across the front of it.

Johnny jogged Grulla the length of the street, conscious of people on the boardwalk stopping to stare at him. He felt his ears growing hot, and again he cursed the unknown hombre who had stolen his clothes. A dude-suit sure seemed to mark a man around this town.

In front of the *Free-Press,* he tossed Grulla's reins to the ground and swung down. Fast riding had done his head no good. It was throbbing like an Apache war-drum, and the confusing questions milling around inside his skull were even more annoying than the ache.

Edgy as a bear just out of hibernation, Johnny Payne stepped to the boardwalk, and automatically hitched at a cartridge belt that wasn't there.

"Don't go reachin' for nothin', pard." The voice came from the far corner of the building. "And don't walk inside that shop. It ain't open to strangers in fancy britches!"

A tall, gangling fellow in levis followed the words. He had a rifle cradled across his forearms, Johnny swung toward the man.

"I'm gettin' tired of bein' hoorawed!" he gritted, and one long step carried him close to the tall hombre. Before the other could swing his rifle, Johnny's balled right fist shot out like a rock in a sling. The most satisfying thing that had happened all morning was the feel of his knuckles biting into the gun-guard's jaw. The man grunted and went over backward. He struck on his bony shoulders and lay still.

Johnny Payne hadn't heard the *Free-Press* door open, but a female voice that sounded like a file rasping a nail said behind him, "You're hired! Our last editor wrote a mighty nice story, but his fists were weak. Come in, young man. Come in!"

CHAPTER TWO

Editor-by-Error

THIS was the climax to a morning full of surprises. Johnny turned around and blinked. The woman standing in the *Free-Press* doorway just about filled it. She was tall as the average man, and a lot broader. Severe black silk clothed her big body. Her eyes were a snapping black on either side of a beaked nose, and her mouth was a prim line beneath it.

Johnny grinned at her, after thoughtfully removing the shells from the fallen guard's rifle and dropping them into his pocket. "That fella is goin' to sleep for a while," he told her. "Banged his head some when he tripped and fell."

"Don't be modest, young man!" the old harridan in the doorway snapped. "You knocked him flat. Come on in here."

It wasn't a request. Johnny followed her

meekly, wondering just what in Hades was going to happen next. He thought by this time that he was immune to surprise, but another one was awaiting him in the dusky *Free-Press* office.

A girl, beautiful as the old woman was ugly, looked at him from the back of the shop. She had Irish-black hair, and there was a smudge of ink on her pert nose. She smiled experimentally, and Johnny Payne grinned in return. She was too pretty for a print shop, and the sight of her made him certain of one thing. He had to put these women straight on his errand and get out of here.

"Ma'am," he addressed the older lady, "I'd like to run me an ad for a second hand six-shooter. Mine was stole this morning, and I don't want to spend the dinero to buy a brand spanking new one."

The old Tartar snorted. "Stand still," she ordered, "and let me look at you. There isn't a Colt to be had in all Fidelity, new or used. Carter and Logan have bought every gun they can lay hands on."

Her eyes ran from his dusty Bluchers up the length of his blue-trousered legs, noted briefly the lean taper of his waist and the spread of his shoulders. She stared longer at the square cut of his chin, and the level brown of his eyes.

Johnny looked back at her, and he felt his cheeks growing hot. "Ma'am," he said, "I want to put that ad in your paper. Nothin' more. I need a gun because I'm likely going to have use for one when I meet up with a fella named Carter. He's a big, wild-eyed hombre wearing a fancy vest and hard-boiled shirt."

"That's Sam," the woman nodded.

"And I didn't take much liking to the gent who might be Logan," Johnny added. "A slab-sided jiggeroo with eyes the color of bullets."

"Both of them," the old lady's tight mouth smiled a little, "are candidates for sheriff. How would you like to live under their rule?"

"Not me!" Johnny exploded.

"Now I know you're hired!" the older woman said emphatically.

Johnny Payne blinked. This was the queerest day he had ever spent in his life. He wondered if that crack on the head had set him to dreaming. Then he was turning as the front door opened, and his hand moved involuntarily to an empty hip.

The fire-eyed cattleman he'd just identified as Carter stood in the doorway, and his handsome face was twisted with wrath. Before he could speak the girl's quiet voice came from the back of the shop.

"I've got my father's Colt trained on your belt-buckle, Sam Carter. Tim O'Shea may be dead, but his gun isn't, so get yourself out of my office right now!"

"I'll get out when you sell me this damned sheet, and not before!" Carter thundered. "Bringing in pipsqueak editors like this feller ain't going to help you any!"

Johnny Payne had moved quietly forward while the other talked, noting that he had left the door open. "I ain't got a gun," he said mildly, "but sometimes a feller don't need one." His long arms reached out, one to the collar of the cattleman's shirt, one to the seat of his pants.

Carter tried to turn, but Johnny's quick move had thrown him off balance. He whirled the cattleman toward the door, and his boot rose expertly. Carter plummeted through the aperture, and Johnny heard him crash to the boardwalk. Moving fast, he got the door shut and snapped the lock.

From the back of the shop he heard uncontrollable laugher, but for a moment it made no impression on him, for he was thinking a little grimly that he had drawn himself some blind cards, and it looked like he was going to have to play them.

"Ma'am," he said gravely as he turned back to face the old woman, "it looks like you've done hired yourself an editor by error. These ain't my clothes, this ain't my business, and I don't know exactly what trouble you're mixed in here, but it sure does look like I've bought chips in the game."

"What you don't know about commas won't matter," the old Tartar snorted. "Our readers know even less. What we need is a man who'll keep the *Free-Press* free!"

The girl had come from behind the counter that stretched across the front of the office. She was carrying a filled gunbelt.

"A fighting editor," she said primly, "might need this. Put it on, amigo. I'm Molly O'Shea, Tim's daughter. My dad started this paper, and I've grown up with it. There's more printer's ink in my veins than blood."

Johnny found himself liking the directness of these women. "Me," he said, "I'm Johnny Payne, top-hand. Leastways, that's the kind of pay I've been drawing. I come here to laze around for awhile, and rest a bum knee, but it don't look like I'm going to get any rest while this Carter and Logan are stompin' and pawin'."

The girl smiled. "You won't. This is my aunt, Dolly Dugan," she added affectionately. "I couldn't get along without her."

"The name doesn't fit me, young man." There was a twinkle in the woman's black eyes. "So I don't even try and live up to it. Come back to your desk now, and settle your spurs. Then we'll talk turkey. I think you'll be the answer to a lady's prayer—and Fidelity's!"

Johnny blinked. Things were getting more involved by the minute. A fiddle-footed cowpoke who'd spent a good share of his life shoving his nose over the next horizon had no business in a newspaper office, he was thinking. But he found himself behind the counter within the space of seconds. A swivel-chair stood behind an ink-stained flat-top table. Johnny took off the unaccustomed coat, and hung it over the chair. Then he belted Tim O'Shea's Colt about his waist, and the comfortable weight of the weapon made him feel dressed again. He settled the gun and grinned.

"This morning," he told the women, "I woke up with a headache. Some hombre slipped up on my camp last night, cracked me over the noggin an' stole my pants. So Carter is the gent responsible for the headache I got right now. I aim to make him pay for that, even if I got to run your newspaper to do it!"

★

"WE'VE been without an editor for close to a month," Dolly Dugan said grimly. Our last one left between dusk and dawn. Since then we've had an ad running in the Prescott *Recorder*, asking for a new one, and we've been wondering why we had no response. You've answered that question for us."

"Logan didn't look none too pleased when I showed up, either," Johnny said slowly. "He was waiting for me at the foot of the stage road, with a half-dozen huskies, but when they saw Carter and his cowpokes following me, they faded fast. Looks kind of like Logan ain't hankerin' to tangle with his rival, which is maybe something to remember. Howsomever, I better get the straight of just what has been happenin' around here before we go off half-cocked."

Dolly Dugan nodded. Her old face turned granite-hard as she said succinctly, "Carter is the plateau ranchers' choice for sheriff. Logan's the miners' man. Whichever one wins the election next week will boss this town, and the decent people living here will be caught like a nut in the cracker between those wild ones. We've been hammering that at them in our editorials, which is the reason for both the Logan and Carter factions wanting control of the *Free-Press*. Each of them want to boost their own candidacy, because they need the independent vote of the townspeople to swing the balance their way."

Johnny Payne rubbed his stubbly chin. "If your townfolks don't want Carter or Logan why ain't they had a meetin' and named a third candidate to run as an independent?"

"We've got a candidate," she snorted. "Friend of Molly's. He's handy with a gun, or his dukes—just the man to see that everybody gets a square deal—but," she pointed her finger like a gun, "we haven't been able to hold a single Citizens' League meeting without either Logan and his hoodlums, or Carter and his boys breaking it up. They've taken turns," she went on bitterly, "and I've seen our good citizens scatter like a bunch of scared quail. Along with that they've had gentle reminders that their stores and their homes might get wrecked if they vote for the wrong man. It's a hellacious situation!"

Johnny pursed his lips. He put his fingertips together and looked at them. "What's this Citizens' candidate of yours been doing about it?" he asked.

"Bert claims it's his duty to make no enemies on either side," Molly O'Shea broke in. "And I think he's right. The next sheriff must keep the peace by making both the miners and cowboys respect him and each other."

"Miners and cowpokes," Johnny grunted, "have been gettin' along like tomcats settin' on a fence ever since gold and cattle mixed in some of these towns. What's this Bert feller do?"

"Bert Slade? Sells ranches and mining properties," Dolly Dugan rasped. "Logan and Carter are afraid he'll win the election. If they weren't, they wouldn't be trying to throttle the *Free-Press*. So far, they've succeeded in doing a good job of it. We're skating on thin ice right now. The bank holds our note, and we can't keep up payments on it without publishing a paper. The last two issues we got out were taken by Logan and Carter toughs right out of the arms of our newsboys. Advertisers won't pay for that sort of thing. So we've got to elect a man who'll bring peace to this town. And we won't have it if either Carter or Logan win office."

Johnny had been listening with close attention. He nodded slowly, and said, "The winner ain't going to have much use for you, that's certain."

"Unless it's Bert!" Molly O'Shea said quickly.

Johnny nodded again. "Yeah," he said, "yeah. And you ain't goin' to get him elected less'n you can boost his candidacy and swing some votes his way."

"And we can't do that without holding meetings, and printing a paper," Dolly Dugan snapped. "We're in a fix, young man!"

"You are, at that," Johnny agreed. His eye fell on a stack of newsprint at a corner of the table, and he pulled paper and pencil to him.

"I ain't no writer," he said mildly, but how does this sound?" He wrote laboriously

for a few minutes, then read what he had penciled.

> There'll be a citizens meetin held tonight in front of the *Free-Press*. *All* candidates are invited to attend and speak their piece.
>
> This here is everybodys election and everybody should know what is goin on. Any hombre able to vote is able to come to the meetin tonight, includin miners and cowpokes.
>
> Come and hear your champ spiel! And don't nobody try and bust up this shindig, because them as does ain't going to get elected!

Dolly Dugan had started chuckling before the editor-by-error was half-finished with his reading. She laughed outright now. "That," she said, "is something we never thought of doing. Our meetings have all been for Bert. Inviting Carter and Logan to appear will put them on their good behavior."

"That's my idea," Johnny answered. "Sometimes it's safer to grab a bull by the horns than by the tail."

Molly O'Shea moved briskly toward the rear of the shop. "I'll get my type stick," she said across her shoulder. "We'll run off a dodger. A couple of hundred should be enough—" her voice trailed off, face clouding. "Only we haven't got any way to distribute them."

Johnny scrubbed his chin. "I make a heap sight better delivery-boy than writer," he said mildly. "You run that stuff. I'll see it gits about. Give me a good chance to get acquainted with folks!"

* * *

Noon had come when Johnny Payne stepped from the *Free-Press* office with the stack of ink-wet dodgers over his arm. Against the whiteness of his shirt, the black print stood out with startling clarity. So did Tim O'Shea's gunbelt and big sixgun, for Johnny had purposely left the blue coat behind. Across the street he saw a man rear from beneath a store front awning, and he started directly for him.

"Friend," he drawled, "you might like one of these. We're gonna have a little shindig tonight, so save your bellerin' for then!"

From the cut of his clothes, he was one of Carter's cowpokes, and he was plainly dumbfounded at Payne's audacity. "The boss says no newspaper's supposed to come out of there," he began.

Johnny's sandy brows rose. "This ain't no paper," he said blandly. "Carter can't kick at a little dodger. Besides, he'll want to be on hand to tell folks how much good he can do the town if he's elected. Where-at will I find him?"

"Likely in the bar at the Cattleman's Rest Hotel," the other answered.

"Thanks," Johnny murmured. He turned with a long stride down the boardwalk. Each passerby got a sheet shoved into his hands, and Johnny could see from the way many of them smiled at the notice that they were pleased at this turn of events. Dolly Dugan, he thought, had been right in her contention that the plain citizens of Fidelity were the ones who would swing the election. But he could also see that many of them were worried.

One whiskered merchant was outspoken. "By dab, I'll be there backin' Slade. If either of them other fellers gits elected, more'n one of us'll have to sell our business and pull stakes. And the new sheriff or one of his hired hands will be the buyer, you can bet. It'll be sell or knuckle under to gun-rule!"

Johnny moved back to the street. He kept remembering the way Logan's crew had vanished at sight of Carter and his cowpokes riding down the stage grade. Carter, he reflected, was in this thing to the hilt, no doubt about it. But there was something peculiar in the way Logan was carrying out his campaign.

A study of the patrons in the saloons where he paused long enough to leave a handful of dodgers reinforced his opinion. Loiterers and ranchmen who were likely Carter followers, scowled on reading the *Free-Press* invitation. Logan backers either shrugged or showed no particular interest.

Johnny shook his head and kept moving. "Mebbe I'll find out more tonight," he counseled himself, "if I keep my eyes open."

To his right, a small, neat building advertised mining properties and real estate for sale. This would be Slade's place, he decided. He turned to the door. Bert Slade had to be a mighty good man if he was Molly O'Shea's choice for sheriff—and maybe more than that.

Johnny turned in through the door. A man rose from behind a desk at the rear of the small office and stepped forward, with a slightly puzzled smile on his face. His face was dark, clean-shaven. Johnny Payne was six feet tall in his boots, but Bert Slade topped him by a full two inches.

Handing him a dodger, Johnny drawled, "We're calling a candidates' meeting tonight. Kind of decided to do it on the spur of the moment, so we hope you ain't got somethin' else planned."

"*We?*" Slade's eyebrows were black as his hair. They rose as he spoke.

"Yup," Johnny nodded. "I'm the new editor of the *Free-Press*, and our slogan from now on will be 'Keep it Free'. Give every man a chance to speak his piece, and let the devil

take the hindmost. That's my idea, and them O'Shea women seem to like it."

Bert Slade blinked and looked down at the dodger in his hand. He studied it for a moment in silence. "I'll be there," he said at last, "but I don't know about Logan or Carter."

"They'll show up, all right," Johnny told the realtor—with more confidence than he felt—"or they won't stand a chance of gittin' elected. Folks are gettin' tired of tomfoolery around here. Its high time we got things right out in the open for everybody to see. Where-at do you suppose I might find Logan?"

Slade shrugged his shoulders, and his eyes had hardened. "If he's in town, you'll find him at the Lodestar."

"That's across the street from the Cattleman's, ain't it?"

If he didn't get himself out of here in a hurry, he and the handsome broker were going to tangle, and now was not the time to make an enemy of Fidelity's choice for sheriff.

He turned before the other could answer his stinging remark. On the boardwalk again, he swung to the right, still trying to figure out just what it was about Slade that had roused his antipathy. Then the sight of the Cattleman's Rest just ahead drove thoughts of the real-estate man from his mind.

Loungers on the wide veranda eyed him curiously as he mounted the steps. Nodding to them, Johnny dropped a half-dozen leaflets on a small table beside the door. The lobby was dusky after the white noon-light, but as his eyes adjusted themselves he saw the sign of the hotel bar above a door to his left. If Carter was inside, he might run into trouble—but he was going in just the same.

YOUR COPY MAY BE LATE

Because of the exigencies of war-time transportation, your magazine may be late sometimes in reaching you. If it does not arrive on time, please do not write complaining of the delay. This delay occurs after it leaves our offices and is caused by conditions beyond our control.

"Yes," Slade nodded his dark head, and then his austere manner softened a little. "I hope we get better acquainted," he said. "I see you're wearing Tim O'Shea's Colt."

"That's right," Johnny said.

"You don't talk or act like a newspaperman," Slade was saying.

"I ain't," Johnny's glance was direct. "One of the cusses Carter hoorawed outa town must have figgered the devil was on his tail, so he shanghaied me and stole my clothes and gun. I'm kinda glad he did," Payne added deliberately. "Clothes sure seem to make the man. Carter figgered I was comin' to help Molly O'Shea run her paper, and so did Logan."

"And you've taken the job, knowing nothing about it?"

Johnny shrugged, and decided he didn't like this Slade hombre any better than Logan or Carter. "I know we're going to keep the *Free-Press* free," he said flatly. "That's more'n other folks seem to been able to do."

Bert Slade flushed. "If you're insinuating that I should have been in there siding them openly, you're wrong!"

"They're backin' *you* to the hilt, mister," Johnny told the realtor. "In my book that calls for a turn-about favor!" He could feel the tips of his fingers start to itch, and that was a sure sign that the anger always close to the surface in him was about to explode. Cattlemen and miners alike were going to have to learn to respect the *Free-Press!*

CHAPTER THREE

The Hangnoose Candidates

TROUBLE faced the editor-by-error the minute he stepped into the bar. Sam Carter was standing with his back to the mahogany directly across the room from him, and Johnny saw that the cattleman already had one of the *Free-Press* dodgers crumpled in his big fist.

"There ain't goin' to be no meetin' tonight, you two-bit pen-pusher!" he roared without preamble. "And if I was you, I'd skedaddle afore the swath you're cuttin' narrows down to nothin'!"

His words were covering the cautious rise of men from tables at either side. Johnny saw them out of the corners of his eyes, and he knew what was coming. Not gunplay; shooting him down might arouse sympathy for two women waging a losing fight to keep their paper. No—beating that would send him out of town as soon as he could crawl to his horse—that was Carter's aim.

The men on either side were coming toward him now, and instinct more than conscious thought sent Johnny lunging forward, straight

toward the arrogant cattleman. Surprise at the editor's move crossed Carter's beefy face, then his hand was slapping down toward his thigh.

Johnny saw the move and he flung the leaflets in his left hand at the cattleman's face. The papers made a fluttering blanket, obscuring the other's gaze momentarily and slowing his draw. Johnny hit him at waist-level with the point of his shoulder, and he heard the heavy bar groan at the impact of the cattleman's big body driving against it. Carter grunted loudly, breath whooshing from his lungs.

Johnny caught the man's gun-wrist, yanked him forward, off balance, and then Tim O'Shea's Colt was rising into his hand as he whirled the cattleman and braced his own back against the bar. Carter's broad shoulders faced the room now, their positions exactly reversed. With the muzzle of his Colt pressed against Carter's ornate belt-buckle, Johnny stared for a second across the other's shoulder, and permitted himself a thin smile. The pair who had planned to jump him from either side were standing motionless, stopped cold by the speed with which he had escaped their trap.

"Just stay like you are," Johnny told them coolly, "and your boss won't get hurt. Come any closer to me, and Fidelity is goin' to have one less candidate for sheriff!"

Sam Carter had regained his breath, and as he brought his eyes back to the man, Johnny saw something like grudging admiration cross the other's face.

"Danged if you ain't the quickest-triggered pen-pusher I've ever seen!" he grunted.

"I ain't no pen-pusher," Johnny told him flatly. "I'm just an hombre who don't like to be hoorawed, or see women bossed by two-bit gunnies. If folks want you for their next sheriff, that's their business. If they want Logan that's their business, too, and if the *Free-Press* figures to back Bert Slade, that's *its* business!"

Carter had backstepped a cautious pace, and that look of grudging admiration was still on his face. "You're on the wrong side of the fence, mister," he growled. "Step around and back me, and your newspaper won't have no more trouble, financial or otherwise. You look too smart to put your chips on a losing horse."

Johnny shook his head. "Save your campaignin' for tonight," he advised. "I'm takin' no sides, save the O'Sheas'. Now if you two hombres will pick up my papers, I'll move along."

"Git 'em for him, boys," Carter growled. "Then one of you run up the street and tell Hank to get away from that office. Mister," he looked back to Johnny Payne, " I like guts where I find 'em. You've got 'em. The *Free-Press* ain't going to have no more trouble from me—and I'll be on hand tonight!"

With a flip, Johnny pushed Tim O'Shea's Colt back into its holster, and he realized that he liked the big cattleman a sight more than the realtor.

"This town," Carter was saying as his two hirelings busied themselves picking up the scattered dodgers, "ain't had any law worth the name for the past year. This special election is bein' called because ol' Abe Snyder, the former sheriff, got his neck broke when he rode home drunk and fell off his hoss. I ain't sayin' Abe wasn't honest. He just didn't have the gun-savvy and guts to rod this town, that's all.

"Logan's miners come off-shift," he went on, "and git likkered up. Then cowpokes from the plateau ride in, and the first thing they know there's a fight. Most times they come out about even, but that don't help none. Fellers with stove-in ribs ain't much good at punching cows. That's why everybody out there got together and figgered I'd make a good lawdog—"

"For your compadres!" Johnny cut in.

Carter shrugged. "I aim to git elected," he said flatly. "Write your own ticket as to how I'll take care of things afterward!"

"You tell that to the folks tonight," Johnny said thinly. He took the dodgers one of Carter's men handed him, and strode back to the lobby. There was one thing a man could say for Carter, he decided. The cattleman was honest in his convictions.

* * *

Three minutes later, Johnny Payne walked into the Lodestar. Jedd Logan was there, flanked by a pair of gun-hung hirelings. One of the *Free-Press* leaflets was spread across a side-table next to the big leather chair in which the slab-sided miner was sitting. At sight of the editor a grin moved his trap-like mouth.

"Howdy, pen-pusher," he boomed. "Come over here and let me shake your hand. Danged if I ain't almost glad you got past Carter and me! Your idea of holdin' a meeting for us three fellers to make our spiel is good. Damned good! If them fool women had been willin' to give us all a chance, 'stead of boosting nobody but Slade, maybe their rallies wouldn't have got busted up so regular. Far as I'm concerned, all I want is an even deal."

Johnny paused before the miner candidate, his thumb hooked through the gunbelt sagging about his waist. No expression touched his long face, but there was an edge of wonder running through him. The thing he'd noticed on his walk through town was even more apparent here. Logan partisans in the saloons he'd visited all had that indefinable

air of confidence about them. It was even more apparent in their bulking candidate.

Why? Johnny asked himself. Certainly they could not have corraled enough votes already to insure victory. It was a question he might have to answer, he thought grimly.

"Carter and Slade will be on hand tonight," he said coolly. "You aimin' to join us?"

"With bells on," Jedd Logan chuckled, "and I'll be countin' on a nice write-up. Fact is I better get a nice spread on the front page."

Johnny Payne's thin nostrils flared. "You'll get what the rest get," he said flatly. "The *Free-Press* is through favorin' one over another."

"Fair enough!" Logan was still chuckling. "Fair enough! I'll buy the drinks—join me?"

Johnny shook his head. "I like a drink as well as the next man," he answered, "but I ain't takin' any until after tonight."

He turned on his heel, and Jedd Logan's chuckle followed him to the door.

"It's got me beat," he told Dolly Dugan and Molly O'Shea, thirty minutes later when he was once more in the *Free-Press* office. "That cuss Logan is settin' back looking like a cat that's been eating cream. Carter, he ain't so sure of himself, and that's why he's been roughing up you folks."

"What do you think of Bert's chances?" Molly O'Shea asked.

"It's going to be close," he said evasively. "Sometimes an outsider can see things other folks can't," he added slowly. "For my money Carter will give this town a squarer deal than Logan, yet Logan acts like he's got the job signed and sealed already. If he gits it, you're going to be in for trouble."

Dolly Dugan broke into the conversation. "If Sam Carter wins," she said grimly, "we'll have open season on any mine-worker that crosses a cowboy. If one gets killed it will mean war. A bloody one, Johnny Payne, that won't end until either the mines close or the cowboys stay home. Either way Fidelity will suffer, and the *Free-Press* along with it. We have got to elect Bert Slade!"

Johnny felt his face stiffening. "Ma'am," he said politely, "I've done promised each candidate a square deal, far as space is concerned, and they'll git it, or I'm pullin' out!"

Dolly Dugan's face had turned hard as granite. "So you won't back Bert? All right! If you had a hat, I'd hand it to you!"

JOHNNY stepped away from the desk. His face was hard as the old woman's as their glances clashed. "I'm givin' you back your job," he said flatly, "but not Tim O'Shea's Colt. Where I'm aimin' to go I may need it."

"Skipping," Dolly Dugan said scornfully.

"Stayin'," Johnny snapped, "until I see this deal closed! Mebbe I'm like a bear-trap. When I get hold of somethin' I don't let go easy. And I ain't pulling out of your town until I learn why Jedd Logan figgers he's already won your election!"

Stiff-backed, he pushed through the swing gate at one corner of the counter, conscious of light feet following him. They trailed him to the boardwalk, but Johnny did not stop until he heard a small, breathless voice call, "Johnny Payne. Wait—"

Johnny turned, and Molly O'Shea, right on his heels, bumped full against him. For the space of one heady second he saw her startled eyes and red lips as she looked up at him.

He leaned forward with an impulse that he couldn't halt, and her mouth was against his. He pulled himself back from her.

"That was for luck!" he said, and his voice sounded harsh in his own ears.

Color stained the girl's cheeks. "I—I just followed you to say that dad's Colt is yours for as long as you want to wear it, and so is the editorship of the *Free-Press*. Please don't blame auntie too much for her stand. She's a little like you, I guess. When she gets an idea, it's hard for her to change."

"You mean backing Slade?"

"Yes," Molly O'Shea nodded.

"And you?" Johnny asked.

The girl's cheeks were flushed. She dropped her eyes momentarily, then raised them to his. "I—I've been for him," she said, and her skirts whirled as she swung back toward the door of the *Free-Press* office.

Johnny stood and watched her, then slowly he reached up to scrub his stubbly chin. It occurred to him suddenly that he needed a shave. . . .

Barbers were talkative souls, too, he had learned, and the one who started slapping lather on his chin ten minutes later was no exception to the rule.

"You're the new ed them O'Shea women hired, I hear," he began. "Hear, too, that you're plannin' a big shindig tonight. Good thing for this town to listen to all th' candidates. Personally, I favor Slade. We need a townsman to run this town, but that cussed Logan, he sure acts like he thinks he's good as elected right now. Carter, he ain't so sure, but he's got danged solid backing out on the plateau. I'd figger it was goin' to be mighty close if that cuss Logan didn't look like he'd ate the canary.

"Saw him ride out of town 'bout thirty minutes ago. Headin' down-river toward the Hassayampa brakes. Funny place for him to be doin' his campaignin'," the barber chuckled. "Ain't nothin' down that way but *oreana* steers and chuckawallas."

Johnny's face was expressionless beneath the barber's slapping brush, but he was thinking fast. If the miner candidate had pulled out of Fidelity about thirty minutes ago, it would set the time soon after his visit to the Lodestar. Could there be any connection?

The razor started scraping his chin, and Johnny fell to thinking again. With the campaign meeting only a few hours away, it seemed odd that one of the candidates should be taking a ride out of town.

* * *

And Jedd Logan was not the only candidate away from his regular haunts, Johnny Payne learned as he strolled down the boardwalk after leaving the barber shop. Passing Bert Slade's neat office, he noticed that the door was closed, and a glance through one of the windows flanking it was enough to show him that the interior of the place was empty.

Straight ahead, he could see Sam Carter's burly shape on the veranda of the Cattleman's Rest. The plateau man was passing out cigars.

"Just what Logan and Slade ought to be doin'," Johnny muttered slowly.

Grulla was back in the shed behind the *Free-Press,* and the town livery was directly across from him. Johnny crossed to it. A rheumatic tender came from the cubby office to one side of the main runway.

"Got a bronc I can rent?" Johnny asked.

"Bring one right up." The old tender peered near-sightedly at Johnny's tall, spare length. "You're that writer-feller, ain't you?" he asked. "The one who made a ninny outa Sam Carter when he tried to hooraw you?"

"Jest the same, you put over a good idee, settin' a meeting for everybody to attend. Holdin' 'em jest for Slade warn't very smart, even though I figger he's the best man to keep order around here. Guess he must think it's in the bag for him."

Barbers and liverymen, Johnny thought, were the best sources of information in any town. He asked a careful question: "What makes you think Slade figgers to have the election tied up?"

"Wa'al," the old hostler chuckled, "Sam Carter is campaignin'. But Slade ain't. He come in here thutty minutes or so ago, got his hoss and rode out the stage road. Said somethin' about looking over some land on the flat, but hell, there ain't nothin' out there."

Thirty minutes. The naming of them was like a gong ringing suddenly in Johnny Payne's head. Curious about Jedd Logan, he had decided to take a ride down toward the brakes the barber had mentioned, in hopes of cutting the other's trail. And now Slade was out and away from town. The flat he'd mentioned looking over was the one the stage road crossed. Chaparral and sage covered it. From any point of view it was worthless, Johnny decided—so why had the *Free-Press* candidate ridden out there at about the same time Jedd Logan was heading for the Hassayampa brakes?

He rode east from town along the stage road, noting with quickening interest that the chaparral covering the flat was tall enough, in most places, to hide a horseman who might decide to turn south toward the bosque of the Hassayampa.

Game-trails cut off through the brush, and in the dust of one, his eye caught the fresh print of a hoof. "Git along, little hoss," he murmured to the bay, and reined the livery animal into the side-trail.

The tracks carried on before him as he followed the crooked trail across the chaparral flat, and Johnny Payne found himself humming a range tune. If he wasn't badly mistaken, the answer to a lot of questions that had been puzzling him might lie ahead in the Hassayampa brakes. A man riding straight south, and another cutting in at an angle from this side, would just about come together at a tall needle-point rock that rose like a sentinel at the start of the brakes. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Hassayampa Showdown

THE SUN was sloping toward the western horizon when Johnny Payne reached the spire-like rock that had been his goal. The bay's coat was rough now, and the blue pants covering Johnny's long legs were torn in a dozen places from the brush.

The sand about the base of the sandstone formation was scuffed with the fresh print of hoofs—two riders had met here, not long before him. Met, and then ridden on together along a twisting wash that led deeper into the labyrinth of cut-bank gullies.

He put the bay into the gulch, following the prints that led on ahead of him. Shadows were pooling here in the brakes as the sun followed its downward course. It was five o'clock, the stem-winder in his pocket told him. Three hours from now was the time set for the *Free-Press* rally, and it would take a man pretty near a third of that time to ride back to town. Logan and Payne couldn't show up together, and yet they'd have to be seen in a few conspicuous places before meeting time.

"Which means they can't plan on spending much more time here together," Johnny said.

He pushed the bay to a faster pace, following the tracks. Winding turns kept obscuring his view ahead. Johnny loosened Tim O'Shea's Colt, and the feel of its black-walnut stock against his palm reminded him of Molly. Bert Slade, he decided grimly, was a fool.

Proof of it came more quickly than he had expected. With the hoofs of his own mount muffled by the sand, he heard the musical jingle of bit-chains as a horse somewhere close ahead, shook his head nervously. Johnny quit his saddle on the instant. He drop-reined the bay, hoping the horse would stand.

Quiet as a stalking cat, he moved forward toward the next bend in the wash, and peered around it. Ahead of him the gulch opened into a little flat. Some years past a prospector had thrown together a single-room shanty here. The roof-line of it sagged now, and the door hung askew on its hinges. Two horses were tied at a corner of the building, and on of them was tossing its head.

There was only one small window in the end wall of the shack. Doubled over, Johnny moved toward it as swiftly as he could, excitement pushing him like a lance against the small of his back.

Hatless, he lifted his head to the dusty pane as words and the rustling sound of papers came through the cracks in the warped boards. "That finishes the deal, Bert," he recognized Jedd Logan's chuckling tones. "Signed, sealed, and delivered. My agreement to you that I'll toss every vote your way when poll-time comes. Ain't a chance in heaven of you losing once I do that. And I'll jest put this leetle memo of yours in my belt for safe-keeping.

"Folks around Fidelity are going to get the shock of their lives when they start realizing that you're backing my muckers to the hilt. We'll push those plateau cowpokes back where they belong, and hooraw the rest of the town into doin' what we say. There'll be enough business houses close up so that you'll be able to buy half the town for a song. It'll leave us sittin' pretty. 'Course half of everything you pick up will be mine. You won't be forgetting that, long as I've got this leetle document you've just signed."

"I don't like putting this in writing," Bert Slade's voice answered in a growl. "If these papers ever fell into the wrong hands, Arizona wouldn't be big enough to hold us. We ought to trust each other."

Jedd Logan was openly laughing now. "Ain't you ever heard that there ain't no honor amongst thieves?" he drawled. "Nope, I like my deals in writing, amigo!"

Johnny moved silently as a cat to the open door. He was standing there, Tim O'Shea's Colt in his hand, as the two men looked up in startled surprise. Johnny saw Jedd Logan's trap-like mouth open and close wordlessly. He watched color seep from Bert Slade's handsome face, and then words rushed from the land-dealer's lips.

"Payne," he blustered, half-rising from the broken-backed chair in which he was sitting, "a newspaperman can go too far, looking for news!"

Johnny chuckled mirthlessly, thinking fast. If he made the pair seated at the wobbly table hand over the documents they'd just signed, they might be able to talk their way out of their predicament by claiming the *Free-Press* had framed them. But if a hundred people saw them draw the papers from their own pockets, not a man in all Fidelity could fail to realize the truth of the sell-out they had planned.

"When I print this news," Johnny told the couple almost pleasantly, "it'll be stale as yesterday's cigar-smoke!"

Something almost like hope crossed Slade's face. "You mean you'll throw in with us? Fella, play this game square, and we'll line your pockets with gold!"

Johnny's chuckle was dry as the rattle of a sidewinder. "I'm goin' to play it square," he drawled. "Square for a lot of people huntin' an honest lawman. Logan," his voice snapped suddenly, "git your hands behind your back. Slade, haul your belt out of its loops, and cinch his paws together. Then yank off his belt and back over here to me. I'll put some O'Shea lead through the first one who makes a bad move!"

He watched Bert Slade rise slowly from the broken chair. His shoulders were humped and there was hopeless expression on his face.

"What are you aimin' to do with us?" Jedd Logan growled.

Johnny's lips twisted, and his eyes flicked involuntarily to the mine candidate. "You'll learn this evening—" he began, and then the words were knocked from his lips by a plummeting juggernaut, moving with the incredible speed of desperation. That one second he'd taken his eyes from Slade had been too long, Johnny realized. He felt himself going over backward, wrenched leg crumpling under him.

Slade's contorted face came before his eyes, and he jabbed one short left into the townman's nose. Blood spurted warmly down over him, and then Jedd Logan's boot came through the red mist. The toe of it caught accurately behind his ear, and Johnny Payne heard the miner's harsh laugh as consciousness faded.

"We'll have a party at eight, tonight, Bert, but this bucko won't be on hand. That'll make one more nosy editor we've rid Fidelity of!"

JOHNNY PAYNE woke with a curse bubbling on his lips. He'd been tricked as easily as a kid not dry behind the ears —and thinking about ears made him reach upward to his own. There was a lump behind the left one as big as a goose-egg, and every muscle in his body was screaming with pain.

Disgust, even more potent than the pain

in him, made Johnny sit up. Rough boards were beneath him, and he could see a square of early night-sky through the door on his left. From the looks of things Logan and Slade had left him in the shack.

Tim O'Shea's Colt was gone from his hip, and it wouldn't be hard to guess that they'd found his livery mount, and taken the animal along with them. "Leavin' me afoot five miles from nowhere," Johnny growled. "No wonder they didn't bother to tie me up. They'll have the meeting I planned for tonight sewed up and in the bag before I can ever make it back to town."

But would they? The thought jarred Johnny Payne, and made him reach for the table alongside. With it to steady him, he reached his feet.

For a moment the shack spun before his eyes, then steadied. Slowly he stepped from the table. His legs felt rubbery beneath him by the time he reached the door.

"Dang things still hold me up, anyway," he muttered. Outside, stars were beginning to show in the sky, and Johnny studied them. "Ain't eight o'clock yet," he decided.

That started him walking. At the edge of the flat, he found a crooked length of fallen chaparral. It made a staff of sorts. Hoofprints scuffed the gulch where he had left his livery mount.

Johnny studied the prints. "Now I wonder," he muttered, "if that danged bronc up and pulled stakes by hisself. If he was that kind of critter, that old liveryman is sure going to be wondering what become of me when the hoss shows up with an empty. Might be a topic for folks to discuss at their meetin' tonight, and make my story a sight easier to believe. . . ."

As he moved on down the wash, Johnny studied tracks. Two horses had left here together. A third set of tracks seemed to wander along ahead of the second pair, and Johnny Payne found himself chuckling at the sight. Yes, Fidelity might be wondering tonight what had happened to their new editor.

"We'll show 'em, if we get there in time," he promised himself, and it was enough to keep him pushing on.

* * *

He was not too late for the rally. That was the first thing Johnny saw when he reached the edge of Fidelity. Men had gathered old timbers and boxes together, and kindled a bright blaze in the street fronting the *Free-Press* office. Miners, plateau ranchers and Fidelity residents were stationed about the fire, their eyes focused on the rude platform erected across the front steps of the office.

All the partisan groups were here, Johnny saw grimly, and so were their candidates. Three chairs had been placed in the center of the stage for them, and two more, one at either end of the line, held Dolly Dugan and Molly O'Shea.

At sight of the girl's slender shape, Johnny felt warmth fill his body, and he wondered again how Bert Slade could be fool enough to figure gold more important than a girl like Molly. Another thought hit him then with sudden force. Bert Slade might not be such a fool at that, *unless Johnny could make him one!*

Climbing that stage and telling the townsfolks what he'd seen that afternoon wouldn't be enough. One man's word was no better than another's before a group of this kind. He had to show them proof—the papers that might still be in the pockets of Logan and Slade. Men busy building party-lines might not have found time to get rid of the documents they'd signed that afternoon.

It was his one slender hope, he realized.

Pausing momentarily in the darkness beyond the crowd, he watched Sam Carter rise and step solidly to the small table.

"Friends," the cattleman's words carried clearly, "I ain't no speechmaker, so I'll make this short. We've all done a lot of hellin' about this coming election, and I been guilty of my share of it. But I've done it because I figure this is cattle-country, and a feller appreciatin' our problems should be next sheriff. There's one promise I'll make you all. If you elect me, everybody is goin' to git an even break around here, mucker, miner, and cowpoke. Thanks, folks—"

A ragged cheer lifted from plateau partisans. Sam Carter had said all there was to say, Johnny thought. He watched Jedd Logan step forward with easy confidence, but there was no time left to listen to the mine candidate. Once Logan and Slade had finished talking, the crowd would start breaking up, and unless he hurried nobody but himself would know that the sell-out was cut and dried.

Moving with the slow gait of an old man, Johnny circled the crowd about the rally fire, and headed for the rear of the *Free-Press* building. The back door was unlocked as he'd hoped. He let himself into the print shop. A lamp turned low burned on the front counter, and Johnny used it as a guide to find his way.

Through the front door he caught Bert Slade's smooth tones addressing the crowd.

"—and as my other honored opponents promised, I will endeavor to keep law and order in this town without fear or favor to any man. That is my word to you, and your vote for me will not be regretted. Solid law is the keystone of prosperity, and Fidelity will grow under my administration."

Johnny Payne drew a deep breath and stepped to the door. An anger that fought the pain in his body moved his hand to the knob.

In another two minutes he was going to be branded either a fool, or the saviour of this town.

* * *

He pulled the door open and stepped out to the platform. Light from the counter behind silhouetted his stooped figure and the crooked staff he was using to support his weight. Shoulders hunched, he stood there for a moment, and a rippling gasp of surprise passed through the citizens grouped in the street. Johnny Payne didn't look much like the man they'd seen ride into town only that morning. His hat was gone, his hair was rumpled, his face was bloody. His clothes were torn and dirty, and he was stooped like a man twice his age.

"Johnny—" Molly O'Shea was the first to speak.

Johnny Payne waved a hand at her, but his eyes were on Jedd Logan and Bert Slade, who had leaped to their feet. In the firelight, their faces showed surprise and consternation. Johnny let them take a good look at him.

Then he said clearly, "Yeah, I know I'm a ghost to you gents. Don't blame you for not figuring to see me here. Didn't figger I'd make it myself. Wouldn't, I guess, if I hadn't been so mad that I just couldn't keep from walkin'!"

"Your horse came back," Molly O'Shea interrupted. "We were all wondering—"

It was what he had hoped. Johnny nodded, and cut her short again. "He come back from the Hassayampa brakes where I met these two friends of Fidelity. For rivals, they were actin' right sociable. Fact is, they'd just finished puttin' their names to a couple pieces of paper agreein' to split this town between 'em, after Logan tossed his miner vote to Slade!"

"He's out of his head!" Jedd Logan snapped.

"I got a lump on it big enough to be," Johnny agreed, "but I ain't. You mind showin' folks what you got in that money-belt under your shirt?"

"Why, you—" Logan's right hand was reaching for the Colt on his hip.

Johnny took a step, and lifted the solid chaparral staff. He felt suddenly good. "Let's see how hard *your* head is," he drawled. Then the swinging stick in his hand caught the mine candidate alongside the ear, and knocked him sidewise into Bert Slade.

The two of them sprawled down on the platform, and Sam Carter moved out of his chair with a whoop of joy. "Things has been too danged quiet around here," he yelled. "Let's see what these hombres got on 'em. But if there ain't nothin', Payne, you better climb your bronc and start ridin'!"

Dolly Dugan had climbed from her chair, and raised it up in a pair of capable hands. "Don't you boys try moving," she advised the pair on the platform. "I may be a woman, but I'm tough!"

Sam Carter had ruthlessly ripped open the front of Jedd Logan's shirt. "Belt here, all right," he chuckled.

From the audience four tall plateau men had scrambled to the platform. Guns poked from their hands. "Jest set," one of them advised.

Sam Carter drew a white square of paper from Logan's belt. Johnny recognized it, and he felt himself breathe for what seemed the first time in hours.

"To whom it may concern," Sam Carter squinted at print lighted by the fire. "I agree to turn over half of whatever properties I acquire from now on to Jedd Logan, in return for the patronage he will be able to accord me in the coming election. And the danged thing is signed, 'Bertram Slade', folks! Personally, I dunno as we need to go much farther. This calls for tar and feathers!"

He passed the note down into the eager hands of the crowd, and an angry roar came up as it went from hand to hand.

The editor-by-error felt Molly O'Shea's hand on his arm, and the girl was looking up at him. "Johnny," she began.

But Sam Carter was on his feet, interrupting her, and Johnny Payne was hearing a campaign speech that certainly had not been planned, for Carter was roaring:

"Listen, you hombres, we've lost ourselves two candidates for sheriff, and you're about to lose a third. I'm pulling my hat outa the ring in favor of a gent who's proved hisself in short order to be a better man for the job than any of us. He'll look a heap sight better wearin' a star than pushin' a pencil. I'm referrin' to—"

"Johnny Payne!" Dolly Dugan's leather-lungs shouted it. "By the Lord Harry, we made an editor by error all right, and I'm the first to admit it. Sam's right, for once in his life. Folks, what do you say?"

There was no question about what they were going to say. The responsive roar was unanimous.

Johnny felt Molly pressing close to him, and he blinked as he looked down into the girl's dark eyes. "You figger," he gathered the courage to speak, "that you might like bein' a law-dog's wife?"

"Yes," she breathed the word softly. "I'll probably spend half my time worrying about you, Johnny Payne, but it'll beat having to teach you to spell!"

And it'll beat tryin' to learn!" Johnny grinned.

THE END

DEAD NESTERS

"We don't aim to move, mister, the girl said. . . .

As a bred-in-the-bone cowman, Tim Marston declared undying war on all nesters who squatted near the Walking M range . . . but a courageous girl set out to teach him that sodbusters are good for other things than cowmen's gun-fodder.

CHAPTER ONE

Lesson for Nesters

TIM MARSTON would have gone down alone except that he felt a show of force might prevent a shooting. So he picked his three best and most steady men to accom-

MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS!

A Range-War Novel

By Art Lawson

pany him; and he started early in the morning, planning for plenty of daylight in which to finish the job.

They rode single-file, trotting their rangy, clean-limbed horses down the long south slope that flattened out where yonder cottonwoods and willows snaked across the prairie to mark Silver Creek. Down east, over the grassland's brown rim and out of sight, the tiny settlement of Sandy Ford huddled. West were the blue and white breasts of Skeleton Hills; while here and there scattered haphazardly along the

ever-flowing stream were little sod huts and willow shanties, the squares of gardens, the haystacks, the wire fences and crude hogpens of the squatters. These were the destination of the four-man cavalcade from the great Walking M.

Tim led his party to the nearest of these, the nester claim of a man named Joe Gibson who had been the first to settle in this region and had chosen a spot where the river took a bend near the hills and a minimum of wire would enclose his quarter section. There was no smoke coming from Joe Gibson's mud chimney this bright morning.

"Maybe he left," Tim said over his shoulder to the man behind him.

"Looks like it," Boston said. Boston was an old timer who rode easy and talked easy. He passed on the boss's remark. "Tim says it looks like Joe Gibson left already."

"Likely he took along a bunch of Walkin' M beef," Spur said. "If I'd of had my way I would of run 'em out last spring. Or shot the whole lot of 'em."

"You just keep your hands off your hoglegs," Tim said. "I'm not lookin' for trouble, cowboy. Don't you go huntin' for it."

Spur shrugged. The fourth member of the party shouted to Tim. "He left—all right. Gibson's gone. His wagon's gone."

They were near enough the place to see that much now. Cutting the fence, they lifted the pace of their horses until they swept into the squatter's yard, crossing a potato patch that had been recently harvested and a stubble of cornfield. Their horses' hoofs stirred up a swirl of dust that sat in the air a moment and then was suddenly whisked away in a whirling dance. It gave a red-gray overlay to the brown grass.

There was no life here. The ironwork had been ripped from the fireplace in the single-room shanty. Bedding, dishes, pots, everything had been removed. The rough chairs and tables had been smashed and the greased-paper windows had been ripped to shreds. What Gibson had not taken he had thoroughly destroyed.

"Burn it," Tim said. "Maybe the rest'll see the smoke and leave before we get to 'em."

The cowboy named Spur brought a big armful of hay from the stack near the hogpen. They added other armsful to it, then set it afire.

The sod shanty burned slowly. It stank as it burned. It made a great smoke in the sky. The men watched it until the roof fell in and they were all somewhat surprised to discover that they found no joy in their work.

"We should of run them out when they first come in," Spur made his favorite speech. "We should of chased 'em out, anyway. Teach 'em a lesson."

"They're gone—ain't they?" Tim said defensively.

The three cowboys shrugged. They had never felt that their boss had a sensible attitude to the squatters. Rough treatment was all those sodbusters could savvy. Waiting for the harshness of the country itself to drive them out was plain soft of Tim, they thought, a manner of handling this problem not at all in the cow-country tradition. But Tim had insisted. And Tim's way had not worked.

Now Tim swung aboard his horse. Last night he had given in to his men and published the fact that he would burn out every squatter left on his land next morning. Joe Gibson had left. It would be interesting to see if the others had gone as well.

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THEY turned their mounts' noses into the rising sun, riding at an easy lope. Cutting another fence, they crossed a field of stubble where red earth looked harshly naked and a few greenish pumpkins had begun to yellow, coming to another shanty.

This one they burned without words. Farther down Silver Creek they put the torch to a more pretentious home that had belonged to one Mike McMahon. Kicking up swirling dust in half a dozen fields, they left half a dozen rolling clouds of ugly black climbing into the the clean heavens behind them. They tore up wire fences as they moved along; and soon they rounded one of those lifts in the prairie where the creek curved like a great slice of silver moonlight, coming within view of a shack with smoke in its chimney and curtains in its windows.

Tim bit at his lower lip. He had been afraid of this. He did not turn to look at Spur who had a very wise expression on his seamed old face. He spoke straight into the breeze. "I'll do all the talking. I don't reckon there'll be any shooting—but if that wild Irish McCullough kid tries anything let me handle him."

"Okay," Boston said behind Tim Marston.

They closed in, riding with Tim in the lead, the others three-abreast behind him. As they brought their horses down to a trot across the plowed land, a barking dog ran out between the horses' legs, nerving them. Tim leaned down to slap the cur with his rope and the dog scurried for the shanty and shelter. Big in the mouth, Tim thought, but small in the heart. That dog somehow typified those nesters whom he had come to hate. He knew that dog had killed at least one of his calves, a little motherless leppy he found dead one day in the grass. Like Joe Gibson, he thought. Joe had run after Tim laid down the law. Like the dog, Joe had barked all summer. Joe had barked big and spent his evenings slow-elking Walking M beef.

The cowboys came to the yard of the shanty where they halted, their big horses standing hock deep in a bed of asters and late fall flowers that were bright and brave in this dull country. As Tim stepped down from a saddle that creaked with unusual loudness, he eased the weight of his gunbelt on his hips, adjusting it for comfort. Striding across the garden to the split-log doorstep, he wished he had stayed at home today. His three cowboys no longer gave him any feeling of security. He was beginning to have the trigger-jitters.

In a dull way he noticed that the door was made of cowhide stretched on a willow frame. The hinges were cowhide, too. On the door someone had humorously scrawled: "No. 1 Riverside Drive."

Tim lifted a hand to knock. The door opened. A girl was standing before him. Her eyes were hard and steady.

"Good afternoon," she said. "We've been expecting you." She nodded her head in the direction of the funeral pyres of other homesteader shacks where smoke still smudged the sky.

Tim had seen this girl before, half a dozen times, maybe. He had seen her leaning over her flowers, tending them with great care. He had seen her in town sitting on the seat of her heavy wagon. Last summer he had seen her and her brother trying to get up their nerve to crash a dance at the Lone Star Hall. They had not come to that dance and he had not seen her since. Now he suddenly realized that he had never before actually looked at her. If it had not been that she was standing in the doorway of the McCullough cabin he would not have known her from any other squatter girl.

Her hair was blue-black, with a soft wave that tight braids could not hide. Her eyes were blue. Though her mouth was set this bright noontime, it was full and generous and could be widely curved with laughter. In a glance he saw all these things he had not noticed before; and he saw that her feet were bare, her body sturdily slender, her breasts high and rounded under the thin material of her one-piece dress.

He had to remind himself that he was tough and hardboiled, that he was Tim Marston whose cattle empire stretched through two counties and more.

"If you're ready," Tim said slowly. "My boys will help you pack up."

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THE girl shrugged. Her dark eyebrows curved. She spoke over her shoulder to the interior of the shanty.

"Ma," she said. "You know what this hombre's talkin' about?"

"Can't say that I do," a woman's voice answered. "We ain't goin' no place."

The girl's eyes were again on the cowboy.

"Ma says we ain't goin' anywhere, mister," she said. "Maybe you made a mistake. If somebody sent for you to help 'em pack up it must of been that yellow Frenchman, Olivier, or Coyote Joe Gibson, or somebody. It wasn't us."

Tim's cheek burned with a slow heat. He knew that Spur and Boston were laughing at him under their poker faces, and that the cowboy, Roan, would be joining them soon. He knew that he had gotten his hands full of something here that he could not handle.

"How about Rush?" Tim asked. "Where is he? I want to talk to him. Tell him I want to see him."

Rush was the girl's brother. Tim did not doubt for a moment that he was inside the shanty skulking in the shadows with a loaded rifle or shotgun. Rush McCullough was as wild as his sister was pretty. He would fight anybody—fists, knives, guns.

The girl's eyes brightened. She was laughing at Tim now.

"Rush went to town last night. Got the harvest in—so we dug some money out of the old sock and gave it to him to go to town and celebrate. If you want to speak to him you better go to Sandy Ford and look him up."

She had Tim completely stymied. The old lady spoke up again from somewhere inside the house.

"Likely he's sleepin' off a hangover in the livery stable or saloon," she suggested. "Likely he won't be in no sort of good humor. Was I you, mister, I'd wait a couple days before talking to that boy."

Anger boiled like hot oil through Tim. When these people had gotten Tim's order to leave the county they had sat down and figured it all out. They had decided Tim would not dare lay a hand on the womenfolk—that if resistance was put up he would take it out on Rush. So they had sent Rush away for the time being. They were defying him alone. They could do this because they were women and he was a man.

This brought a sudden surge of black anger to Tim and he forgot his promise to himself not to resort to violence until all else failed. Tim turned jerkily to his men who sat like owls on a log staring at him.

"Okay, boys," he said. "The ladies want us to help pack up their wagon. Suppose you sort of stand guard, Spur, in case the McCullough kid is hiding in the grass somewhere. You fetch the wagon, Roan. Boston—you come down here and give me a hand—"

The men hurried to follow his orders. Tim turned back to the girl. She had taken a double-barrelled shotgun from behind the door. She held it as steady as if it were in a sighting vise.

"We don't aim to move, mister," she said.

CHAPTER TWO

Tim Checks the Bet

THE McCULLOUGH girl had made a mistake. Tim did not understand girls, but he did understand guns. Moving with the incredible precision of a trained gunfighter, he stepped in and to the right, swivelling from the hips. He reached for the girl's wrist, not for the gun-muzzle, sweeping the weapon aside as he yanked her toward him. She did not even have a chance to squeeze the trigger when pain in her arm made her drop the shotgun and she found herself the unarmed prisoner of Tim Marston.

Kicking at his shins with bare heels was a futile thing. Trying to fight out of his grip was like struggling with a steel-muscled monster. The girl's mother was reaching for the shotgun when Boston leaped through the door and stamped the weapon out of the older woman's hand.

Boston picked it up and broke it. His voice was hollow, incredulous. "It wasn't loaded," he said. "She was bluffing."

Tim felt the girl move in his grip. He was holding her back to him, his arms under hers, his hands holding her opposite wrists tight against her breast. The faint perfume of her rich hair was in his nostrils. The soft warmth of her body reached him.

"What's the idea of an empty gun?" he asked irritably.

"I didn't want to kill you," she said.

Her words were so quiet as to be hardly audible. She began to tremble. As he held her there in awe something damp and warm splashed on one of his big hands. All the bravado had gone from her. He realized she was crying. He was holding her in his arms, practically, and she was setting up to bawl.

"When she seen you coming she unloaded the gun," her ma said. "She sent Rush to town yesterday when she got your letter. She didn't want you and Rush shooting at each other. She didn't want to shoot you, either." The old lady cleared her throat with great vigor. "She's a damn silly fool," she announced. "I'd of shot you and had it over with."

Tim Marston was licked. These women had beaten him. He let go of the girl, but she did not move away from him. He stared into the stupid face of Boston who was holding up the shotgun as if it were an exhibit in a museum.

"Let's get out of here," Tim said. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Tim ran across the crushed flower bed to his horse. Spur, on guard was silently laughing at him. Roan had hitched up the team and was cursing the balky horses into dragging the wagon up to the dooryard.

"Damn it!" Tim shouted at him, "leave those horses alone. We're gittin', cowboy."

Roan gaped at him in astonishment. Tim was well out of the yard before the others hit their saddles and followed. Tim's horse was heading for Sandy Ford as if the Devil, himself, had stuck a handful of hell-grown burrs under his saddle.

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TIM got drunk in the Forty-Rod. Gus kept telling him not to drink so much and Tim swung on him. Gus ducked. Tim's fist connected with a bottle that had been standing on the bar and sent it shooting down the length of the room as if it had come from the mouth of a mountain howitzer. The neck broke against the adobe wall and whisky drooled to the floor, as Gus came up from behind the bar holding the bungstarter.

"Last night it was that damned squatter McCullough," he said. "Now it's you. And it don't make a bit of difference to me, brother. There ain't no fighting in the Forty-Rod."

Tim sobered enough to beg his pardon. With Boston, Spur and Roan he could have taken the place apart and fed it to Gus for breakfast. Those three cowboys were spoiling for the excitement they had missed. If they had been younger men they would have jumped the boss's no-fighting rule long ago and started a riot.

"Forget it," Tim said to Gus. "Skip it, pal. No offense, boys. Le's go down the street where we can fight in peace."

Hopefully the cowboys followed him to the Palace, clanging their spur-chains and swaggering. A bunch of Big B cowboys were drinking quietly there. They made a space at the bar for the new outfit. Tim ended up beside a short, bald-headed man who grinned up at him.

"Evenin'," the man said. "Set 'em up, Henry," he shouted.

Tim shook hands with this man. Between them, Tim and Sam Bonsell of the Big B owned everything you could see from the top of the only two-storied building in Sandy Ford and a lot that was out of sight over the horizon. Sam was quite a bit older than Tim, pushing up to fifty. He had come to the country about the same time that Tim's pa had driven his wagon across the ford and had kicked ever since because he was a couple of days late and old Marston had already staked out the best grass and water for his home range.

Long ago Sam Bonsell had made up for what he had lost in being late by buying up and running the town. In no means was he

holding the dirty end of the stick in Sandy Ford and Silver Creek Counties.

Sam was praising up Tim Marston. "You done right," he was saying busily. "You done absolutely the right thing."

"He had no business talking that way," Tim said. Tim blew on his knuckles. "I should of finished him off."

"You been fighting?" Sam's eyes glowed.

"He took a swing at Gus," Spur said, "an' hit a bottle instead. You should of seen it."

Sam was disappointed. "Oh—Gus?" he said. "I meant them squatters. You done right to kick them off the range."

Tim shrugged as if it were no concern of his. Henry had filled the glasses. Sam Bonsell clicked his against Tim's, spilling a bit of the rotgut. Sam licked his lips in anticipation of the drink and tipped his black derby hat back so the front of his shining bald head gleamed in the lamplight.

"To Tim Marston," he toasted.

The men shouted. Tim's ears got red. Tim gulped his drink while the others were still yelling. It tasted like liquid pepper but did not seem to have any beneficial effect on him. It was sodden—like something from the bottom of a cyprus swamp.

Tim suddenly decided he had had enough of this. The thing that was eating at his heart had taken away whisky's power to help him forget. He signalled to his three men, all of whom were rather unsteady on run-over boots. Sam put a hand on Tim's arm to detain him.

"Seen Rush McCullough?" he asked.

Tim shook his head. Sam's grip tightened.

"You're my friend," he said. "We got to stick together. You know that, Tim."

Tim said: "Last time a feller talked that way to me he wanted to borrow some money—and the time before the feller was tryin' to lead me into a trap."

Sam laughed so his heavy belly shook.

"That's damn good, Tim," he praised. Then he swallowed a sip of his drink. His eyes narrowed. "Joking aside; Rush's laying for you. The whole bunch of squatters are down at the wagonyard waiting for you to show up in town. Rush McCullough's been tellin' them you wouldn't have the guts to show up—and he's been boastin' of what he'd do to you if you did come around. If I was you, I'd keep away from them."

Tim stared into the watery eyes of Sam Bonsell. It was like looking into a pool and trying to count the trout hidden beneath the rocks.

Tim said: "Thanks, Sam. Maybe you saved my life."

Tim strode out of there, his three men following him. They had heard Sam's comment on McCullough. It looked as if the excitement they had wanted was coming up right away. A fifth man followed them to the door. After a while he came back to the bar and took up a place beside Sam Bonsell.

"I owe you a drink, Sam," he said.

Sam smiled thinly. "It was a sucker bet, Dixie. I knew him and his old man before him. They could keep from fightin' just so long. The drink's on me."

Sam ordered the best whisky in the house.

★

TIM stood on the edge of the boardwalk glancing up and down the dark main street of Sandy Ford. Dogs were barking in the Okay wagonyard to the east of town and a baby was squalling. These were two things nesters never seemed to run low on—dogs and kids. He heard some singing, too, strong and clear and sad. A man's voice and a guitar—one of Stephen Foster's songs—the one about the old dog:

"Old dog Tray's ever faithful,
Grief can not drive him away.
He is gentle, he is kind; I'll never find
A better friend than old dog Tray."

"Sounds like the McCullough kid," Boston said.

"He's down there now a-waitin' for you," Spur said. "He's always singin' them songs and a-twangin' on his guitar."

Tim licked his lips. "We're going home, boys," he said. "Back to the Walkin' M. We got them squatters off our range and that's all we got to do. If Sam don't like 'em messin' up his town he can kick 'em off, himself."

The men did not move. They listened to the McCullough kid's voice. Behind them the Palace Saloon was unusually quiet. There was peace at the Forty-Rod, too. A dog kept howling steadily while McCullough sang.

Spur said softly, talking to the night: "We go home now and tomorrow every damn one of them nesters will be squatting on his rump up the creek again. They'll figger they can bluff us just like the McCullough women did."

"They didn't bluff anybody," Tim said sharply.

"Maybe I was wrong," Spur shrugged.

They could hear the rattling of a heavy wagon coming along the rutted prairie road from the west. A couple of dogs in the wagonyard set up a fight. Rush McCullough tuned for a new song.

"I'll go down and talk to them," Tim said. "I'll sort of say good-bye to them."

His men perked up again, tugging at their gunbelts, their faded old eyes glowing. Boston and Spur sided Tim, Roan taking up the rear as was his custom. Their spurs made a brave rattling down the street and their heels tapped

sharply on the boardwalk. They did not notice that Dixie had come to the door to pretend he was sampling the weather while he prepared a report for Sam Bonsell.

The Walking M men went right on into the wagonyard without a moment's hesitation. There were a dozen or more wagons here in a semi-circle that filled one-half of the big yard. A bonfire burned brightly. Hay had been spread under some of the wagons for beds. A couple of tarpaulins had been pitched to form a kind of tent. About twenty men and older boys lounged away from the bonfire near the wagons. On the tailgate of one covered Studebaker a young woman fed her baby. On another Rush McCullough sat, legs dangling, holding the guitar across his knees.

Rush was as handsome as his sister was lovely. Tall as Tim, and not enough younger to deserve being called the "McCullough Kid," he was heavily muscled from hard work of farming prairie sod, but unlike most of these nesters, he did not have their settled stolidity.

Tim guessed that these people had been expecting him. Except for the woman with the baby, they all had a handy hiding place, a spot where they could fort up in an instant in case there was shooting. They were also all armed, mostly with shotguns.

For a second Tim wondered if he had walked into a trap. Even the woman with the baby might have been placed there just to keep him from being too suspicious.

"Evenin'," Tim talked straight to Rush. "I dropped in on your ma and your sister this morning." Rush's cheek muscles twitched very faintly, hardly noticeable in the firelight. His eyes were steady. The woman with the baby jumped down from the wagon on which she had been sitting and disappeared behind it. Tim went on: "They kind of figure on staying up there this winter. Maybe you can help them change their minds."

Rush McCullough shrugged his powerful shoulders. The rest of the menfolk edged even farther into the shadows and the protection of the wagons.

"They're kinda stubborn," Rush said. "You don't know them two women when they make up their minds."

A faint titter ran through the tension. Tim's cheeks were reddening. Tim spoke slowly, as if he had memorized his speech.

"The land's blowing away," he said. "This isn't farm country. Once the sod's broken the whole country will blow away. I sort of thought you folks were good enough farmers so you'd find it out for yourself. Reckon you have now—except for the two McCullough women—"

The harsh voice of a man broke in from the right.

"I never harvested a better crop in my life, mister. This is all a fairy tale about the land blowing away. A little dust, is all."

"Shut up," Rush McCullough said sharply. "Let him have his say."

The man subsided. Tim recognized him as Joe Gibson. Tim had expected trouble from Joe and had been surprised that the man left so quickly after the law had been laid down.

Now a baby whimpered. Except for that and the faint sounds of a great restlessness of men and women and kids, of dogs and horses all confined in the Okay wagonyard, there was a silence. Rush was waiting. Tim was waiting. Tim had to talk. He had lost his patience.

"That's all," he said. "Are you goin' to move?"

"No," Rush said.

Tim unbuckled his gunbelt and passed it to Spur. Rush set down his guitar. It made a little musical note that floated over the wagonyard like something from another world. Jumping down from the wagon, he came around the bonfire with light steps. Rush McCullough looked almost happy.

"I'm sorry it came to this," Tim said. "It's bad enough having to kick you off a piece of land you've chosen to live on—without having to beat you up, too."

McCullough laughed at him—then danced toward him.

CHAPTER THREE

Nester Round-Up

FIRELIGHT gleamed on the faces of the men. Rush McCullough closed in fast on practiced feet. Tim waited, flat-footed. He ducked swiftly, letting Rush's first swing take off his Stetson and send it sailing past the Walking M cowboys. When he straightened he brought a fist from the dust aimed for the point of the farmer's chin. It missed its objective, sliding up alongside Rush's cheek, scraping the corner of Rush's eye and drawing first blood. Immediately on its trail, Tim smashed a left to Rush's stomach stopping his enemy and holding him there flat-footed.

That was a good thing to feel, that nester's hard stomach under his fist; it was so good Tim put his head down and charged in punching with both left and right, piling up his blows one on top of the other trying for a quick decision. But McCullough was having none of this. Plowing, digging, forking potatoes and shucking corn had turned him into iron. He clubbed a fist for Tim's ear, smashing straight down, jambing a knee into Tim's face when the cowboy stumbled forward off balance. Then he stepped away. Though Tim's whole head was one red ball of fire he anticipated this move on Rush's part and sidled over to stop him. He hooked a spur behind the

farmer's heavy boot and jabbed an elbow into his solar plexus. Rush went down over Tim's out-thrust knee. As he did so all the women in the wagonyard screamed like a concerted congress of banshees. It took Tim a second longer to realize that he had thrown Rush into the bonfire.

He caught Rush's foot and dragged him out. Someone threw a pail of water on McCullough. The back of his shirt sizzled faintly.

Tim stood back while Rush got to his feet. "Thanks," Rush said.

"Through?" Tim asked.

"No."

Rush charged in. Rush was tough as a longhorn steer; but like that famous animal, he was short on tactical surprise. He had a tendency to repeat his tricks and now Tim knew what they were. Tim angled Rush off his straight route. Instead of attacking him from below, Tim swung a wide haymaker that did no damage in itself but helped put Rush off stride. Then he stepped in very fast.

Tim shrugged. Tim did not know any better how to handle this man than he had known what to do with his women. Tim licked blood from his lips. He faced the nesters then, steadying himself on spread legs.

"I—uh—if any of you need anything, go down to see Jaky at our commissary," he said. "Anything but shells for your shotguns. Sorry I had to work over McCullough. Some day you'll all be glad you moved, though. Yonder—over the hills, is good farm land.

Nobody answered him. The men stood by their wagons staring at him. Rush McCullough looked steadily at him. Fighting had solved nothing. There were eyes in the night, staring eyes, steady eyes, watchful eyes, boys and men, and beyond them women and girls and babies and numberless dogs. Nobody said anything at all.

Tim felt as if somebody had dumped a handful of ants down his back.

"Guess that's all—" he said lamely. "If yuh need anything—Jaky'll give it to you."

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He brought a left to Rush's chin. Rush countered by swinging at Tim's jaw. Tim pulled his head back. Rush's arm sped by and Tim caught his wrist in both hands and pulled forward. Rush started to fall. As he did so Tim kicked him in the face. Rush's knees gave way and he sat down stiffly.

Round two.

"That's for kneeing me," Tim said. Tim's men were howling. The nesters were menacingly silent. "You want to fight some more? You want to fight straight?"

Rush stood up. He had lost his steadiness, but not his nerve. He still went to battle with the old system. One of his eyes was half closed. His lips were both cut and blood dripped from his chin. His shirt was burned off. Yet he still wanted to fight. But Tim had had enough. He kept on backing away from Rush, taking the farmer's charges and repulsing them as lightly as possible. He went clear around the fire until a couple of nesters ran out to rescue their man. Then he stepped away and let them have him. Rush's knees would hardly hold him up when the two men grabbed him under the arms. His eyes, though, held Tim.

"I ain't changed my mind," he said.

He stood against that silent wall a moment; then swung away, his face hard as a rock. He picked up his Stetson, dusted it and set it on his head.

Then he accepted the holstered six-shooter that Spur held out to him and buckled it around his waist. He was not expecting any gunfighting so he did not tie down the thong at holster tip.

His three men fell in behind him as he marched toward the big, wide gates, striding sharply, and trying to look a lot braver and more successful than they felt. By rattling their spurs and creaking their gunbelts and stamping their high heels they tried to build up bravado within themselves. Three hombres who would face hell and highwater, stampeding herds or bucking guns, blizzards and prairie fires, were scared to their bones by a fight that had proved nothing, by silence and eyes in the dark.

When they reached the boardwalk they found that they could breathe more easily—and then it happened. A shotgun blasted; its buckshot whistled. All the dogs began yelping at once. Women screamed and kids bawled and men cursed. A couple of horses whinnied, stamping out their nervousness. Leading his

men, Tim Marston halted in a crouch. As he did so, something like a huge hand picked up Roan and tossed the cowboy against his boss. Tim went to his knees under the sudden weight and impact, and Roan tumbled off. A convulsive shudder passed through him as he sprawled spread-eagled, lax and motionless on the boardwalk.

Dark stains began to spread from half a dozen bullet wounds in his back. Roan had not been given any kind of chance. . . .

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THAT shot had been meant for Tim, so Tim reasoned. It had been meant for him and this cowboy who had never done anything bad to anyone had taken it and had died without even a dog's chance of fighting back. So Tim would do his fighting for him.

He lay on his belly in the road looking over the splintered planks of this part of the walk through the wide gates of the wagonyard. Rush McCullough and his two friends had vanished. His guitar still sat on the tailgate of the wagon looking bright in the firelight, as if it had just been polished. It looked almost alive; the only live thing there except for the fire.

Then Tim spotted movement and he shot at it with his Colt. A dog yipped wildly. It came hopping into view, then fell dead beside the fire, its tail switching a couple times before it lay soft and motionless.

Each side had scored. Each side had killed an innocent victim. One cowboy—one dog.

Spur was beside Tim thirsting for a target. To the far left, Boston was angling for a shot through the gate. Tim whispered to Spur.

"We got to get Roan to a sawbones," he said. "Maybe he ain't dead yet. I'll get him off the walk. You cover me while I fetch him in. Sabe?"

"Okay," Spur said.

Tim snaked back onto the walk, keeping himself hidden behind the body of Roan until he reached the huddled cowboy. Even then Tim could not be sure that Roan was dead. There might still be some hope of saving him. He caught Roan by the collar. Spur showed himself to draw gunfire from inside the wagonyard and Boston sent a couple shots skittering through the canvas of the squatter wagons. He hit some iron pots, causing a great racket and starting a baby to crying. In the meantime Tim got Roan off the boardwalk. He lay there on his belly beside the dead cowboy.

Tim was sweating. He did not trust Boston any more. That bawling baby had upset his nerves.

"Damn it!" Tim swore. "Come back here. Come here, Boston. Take Roan up to the doc. He don't seem to be breathing. Damn it, Boston, we ain't in the baby-killing business. Come here."

Boston worked back to the gutter. He dragged the body of Roan away from the gateway, leaving a trail of blood in the red-gray dust. Now men were running down the boardwalk, coming from the saloons, shouting. That shot of Boston's had set off the squatters, too. Hunkered down behind boxes and wheels, they were firing their shotguns out the open gate of the wagonyard, keeping their barrage low, splintering the walk, whining across the street. Glass shattered in the building yonder. The dogs were howling like crazy, and every single nester baby was bellowing.

Cowboys from the saloons halted out of range. Boston had gotten Roan to a safe place. The Big B boys clustered around him talking excitedly.

Sam Bonsell yelled at Tim, "You want any—"

Tim did not hear the rest of it. The bedlam drowned it out. Tim lay in the gutter shouting.

"Go back—damn it, Sam—take your boys back before there's a massacre!"

Maybe Sam did not hear him. Maybe Sam could not stop his boys. They kept pushing up, crowding toward the gates, threatening. Then, after the first wild wave of shooting, a sudden silence clamped down on the squatter shotguns. A heavy tremor shook Tim's lean body, and there was a red throbbing in the back of his head, the bitter urge to kill the man who had so treacherously shot Roan. With one fist he clutched the earth below as if by doing so he could hold back from charging the forted squatters alone. Now Sam Bonsell and his boys halted again where buildings would protect them from guns inside the wagonyard.

"You hurt?" he shouted at Tim. "Roan's dead—dead as a—"

"The dirty, stinkin' son of a gopher," Tim swore. "They didn't give him any warning at all. I'll—" His voice choked off. He coughed. "Leave this to me, Sam," he shouted. "Damn it—Sam—"

From the time the first nester family tooled its wagon over the eastern horizon last spring Tim had consistently refused to use force against them. Tim had honestly believed the land would prove too rugged for them, that drought and wind would drive them to greener fields beyond yonder Skeleton Hills. Even tonight, after he had finally been forced to order them off his range, he had offered them food and supplies and help.

And his pay had been in murder.

Sam's boys were crowding up again. "Make your play, Tim. We'll back it!" Sam shouted.

"Let's get at 'em, Tim," Spur counselled.

Tim came to a hard decision, possibly the last decision he would ever make.

"There's one skunk in there," he said, "and fifty women and kids. I'll go in there and fetch out the skunk. I'll go in alone."

Tim settled his pistol in its holster.

"That's suicide," Sam Bonsell shouted.

"Don't be a crazy fool!" Spur yelled.

"It's the only way," Tim said.

He stood up in the gutter, in full sight of all the assembled squatters, holding his hands palms forward, shoulder high, obviously empty. He started to walk straight ahead into the wagonyard. . . .

TIM had taken hardly more than three short steps when commotion shook the massed townspeople and cowboys on the boardwalk. It was like a wild bull that had managed to escape during a rodeo and was charging through the crowd. It started at the far edge and swept in toward Tim in the gateway. It was caused by a woman shouting; by half a dozen men yipping like coyotes under a full moon.

A couple of cowboys had captured Bess McCullough. They were holding her arms behind her back, holding her up on her bare toes with her full breast arched upward. She still wore that plain dress she had had on during the early afternoon. The skirt had been torn in the struggle, exposing her leg half way to the thigh. Her carefully plaited hair was dishevelled. Now Tim saw that her blue-black locks were true curls, that they fell below her shoulders framing a fighting Irish face.

"Tell these hydrophobied coyotes to leave go of me," she ordered Tim.

"We can hold her," one of the cowboys suggested triumphantly, "until they trot out that killer."

"What killer?" the girl demanded.

Tim said: "One of your bosom friends killed Roan. Roan never hurt nobody. Roan couldn't even brand a calf without sayin' his prayers. One of your nice little buddies shot him in the back with a shotgun."

The girl stood stunned. Some of the fight went out of her. She let her weight sag against the men who were holding her.

"It wasn't Rush," she said.

"Could of been," Tim said. "Rush was in there. Rush had plenty of reason for trying to shoot somebody. Rush was in a right handy place to do the job." The girl slowly shook her head. Tim went on. "I'm going in there and bring him out—or the hombre who done it." Tim's eyes moved to the cowboys. "Keep a good hold on her until I get back. She's tricky."

He turned back to the nesters. He was startled to see that Rush McCullough had come out of hiding. Rush was standing at the far side of the fire not far from the dead dog. He had picked up his guitar, again, and was holding it in his hands, holding it to show that he was unarmed. His face was puffy, battered—but he had managed somehow to splash some water on himself and wash off the blood.

"That's my sister out there," Rush said coldly. "You were lying to me about leaving her at the homestead. If you've hurt her—"

"Nobody's hurt her," Tim said. "Nobody's lied to you. But you or one of your skunk friends murdered a pal of mine. Trot out the killer or we'll hang every damn man in this wagonyard."

He was talking mighty big for a single man facing a score of squatters armed with shotguns. But the cold anger in his voice chilled even Rush McCullough who had fought with him so recently. It sent a shiver through every man there, a shudder you could feel passing through the mob outside the picket-fenced yard. The bitterness of his voice scared the kids into silence. It even shut up the yelping dogs.

Then the girl broke the silence.

"They haven't hurt me, Rush. Ma and me decided to come into town. We're okay. I didn't know about that killing."

Her voice had a lift to it. It had a brightness to it that was an odd thing.

"You got it, Rush," Tim said. "Now trot out your killer."

For a moment the Irishman lost a bit of his cockiness. He shrugged his shoulders.

"The trouble is—" he said "—I don't know who done the shooting."

"We'll find him," Tim said.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blood on the Land

THE FARMERS did not have a leader. Rush McCullough had been their chosen representative, but was doing nothing now. Their moment of passion had passed when they all emptied their shotguns in the general direction of the hated cattlemen. They were homeless and lost and frightened. They were worried about their women and kids. Reading the plain cold threat in Tim Marston's eyes, they knew that he meant what he had said. He would hang them, one or all if he had to, to make sure that he hanged the man who had murdered his friend.

Of course they could have killed him there in the wagonyard. They could have shot him down as one of their number had obviously tried to do before when Roan was murdered by mistake. But no man there at the moment was ready to appoint himself as executioner.

Rush McCullough put their feelings into words:

"I been telling you boys I'd never back down to any lousy cattleman. You saw me prove it tonight. He was just too big and tough for me. And he's too big and tough for all of us. We got no choice. You got to believe me when I say I didn't kill that Roan cowboy. Somebody did, though, and we got to find out who."

"How do we know this ain't a trick?" Joe Gibson asked from the shadows.

Tim said sardonically: "Suppose it is a trick. Like Rush was saying, you don't have any choice, squatter. Suppose you come out first. Do you want me to come after you?"

Joe Gibson appeared, shuffling, carrying his shotgun. Tim took it away from him. Tim knew the nesters were all about him. He knew his life was hardly worth a dime right now. But Tim would not show fear to them.

Both Joe's barrels had been emptied of shot. He had used his gun. Tim gave it back to him.

"Bachelor, ain't you?" he said.

Joe nodded. "For the time being."

"If you're figuring on getting married," Tim suggested, "keep your big mouth shut. Now—git over there and stand by the fence."

Joe Gibson "got." Then other men emerged from their hiding, slowly, furtively hugging shadows close to the great wheels of their wagons, clinging to their shotguns and rifles. Though the fight seemed to have gone completely from them, they might blow up again like a powder keg if Tim gave them a chance.

Tim gave orders to Rush McCullough who relayed them to his people. "Hitch up your wagon, Frenchie," he told Jules Olivier. "Snap to it. You, too, Mike. Hitch up yours. The rest of you stay where you're at."

The two men ran to obey. They knew that the wagonyard was completely surrounded by angry armed men. They felt the presence of the mob on Main Street. They knew the cold violence of Tim Marston, and somehow they even sensed the helplessness of Bess McCullough who was still prisoner.

"Tell 'em to let the women do the driving," Tim ordered Rush. "Tell the women to head east and to keep on moving. The men—and any boys big enough to hold a shotgun are going to stay behind.

Rush McCullough did not have to pass on that order. The women wailed. Frenchie Olivier's wife had to be taken from him by main force. Cowboys led the teams out of the yard and started them toward the prairie. Frenchie tried to follow his family. He shouted at them, something in their own language, about courage and *"Le bon Dieu."* Then he came back, shoulders sagging.

"I didn't do it," he insisted. "I didn't—"

"You had a shotgun," Tim said shortly. "Let's see it." He examined the weapon and found it had been used. Frenchie had reloaded. Tim took out the shells and returned the gun. "Stand over there by the wall, Frenchie. You, too, Mike."

Mike McMahon's oldest son was with him, a boy of about twelve. Mike's gun, like the others, had been used tonight. The boy was unarmed. Mike and the boy had guts. They stood straight as wagon stakes. They could hear Missus McMahon threatening to come back with a gun and clean up the whole town of Sandy Ford if anything happened to her boy or man. Mike had to grin.

"Okay, Rush," Tim said. "Next pair."

These two men went about their jobs with a leaden earnestness. The wife of one cried steadily, silently, as he kept talking to her.

"Nothin' to worry about, Millie. Nothin'. I didn't murder that cowboy. They ain't goin' to hang me, Millie. I'll be out there on the prairie tomorrow sure as shootin'."

He led his own horses to the gate, handed the reins to his wife and kissed her. He walked with courage to the place where Mike and his kid and Frenchie and Joe Gibson waited their fate.

The other man joined them. His face was wooden. His wife's face had been wooden, too. He waited until she got her team into the street. She called something to him. Suddenly he began shouting.

"By God, they won't hang me! I won't be hanged like a common criminal! Damn you, Marston—"

He reached into his shirt, yanking out an old single-action Colt. Tim was ignoring him at the moment and did not see the move. Possibly half a dozen cowboys saw it, though, and they were fast with their irons. In seconds the place would be a shambles.

Then Mike McMahon moved. He slammed the man in the stomach with the butt of his shotgun, doubling him up. He took away the old Colt and threw it into the center of the wagonyard. The miracle had happened. Nervously the cowboys reholstered sixshooters. The nester who wouldn't be hanged was sitting on the ground crying.

"Get at it," Tim said shortly to Rush. He could not expect another miracle to save them when the next nester went berserk. "Two more—keep 'em moving."

The rest of the men did not object. Their spirit had been broken. One by one their wives drove their teams and wagons out of town until there was a long, thin line raising dust in the moonlight, wagons full of scared kids, skinny dogs slinking alongside.

One by one the men lined up against the wall and after a while Tim found that he again had company. Sam Bonsell had joined him. A couple of Sam's cowboys were backing up their boss. Spur and Boston were with Tim.

"You ought to hang the whole bunch of

'em," Sam whispered to Tim. "Teach a lesson to the squatters."

Tim was becoming annoyed with Sam Bonsell. The Big B owner was too damn free with advice and suggestions tonight. Tim recalled that it had been Sam who had implanted in his mind the original notion to come down here to the wagonyard. Sam had bought him a drink before telling him that Rush McCullough was laying for him. Sam had backed up Tim all the way—and this was strange behavior for the man—even though he had kept himself in a safe place all the while.

"Suppose *you* do the hanging," Tim suggested.

Sam laughed. "Hell! This is your show, not mine. Didn't mean to horn in, Tim. Just wanted you to know we were with you."

"That's fine," Tim said. "Thanks a lot."

Tim went up to the men who were lined against the wall, about twenty all told, including half a dozen boys. Some of the boys had not been armed when they came from hiding. A couple of the men had been weaponless, too, but all the others carried shotguns that had been used this evening. Just because a man did not have a gun did not prove that he had not had one when the killer shot was fired. He could have thrown it over the fence or slipped it into his wagon.

Tim said shortly: "If anybody knows who done this killing, it'll save a lot of trouble. Speak up."

The men did not answer. They stood sulking, defiant. During the silence a couple cowboys brought a wagon down to the yard's entrance. Ma McCullough was on the seat. It was the wagon Roan had hitched up for the McCullough women early that afternoon.

"What'll we do with this one?" a cowboy asked.

Tim had forgotten all about the McCullough women. Having women here was plain distraction.

"Send it along with the others," Tim said. "Put the girl aboard, too. She'll only be in the way when we start hanging her friends."

Terror like a black cloud swept across the faces of the men against the wall. Many a one of them wished now he had fought it out when he had the chance.

Meanwhile they were having trouble loading Bess McCullough onto her mother's wagon. The girl fought off the two cowboys who held her and ran into the yard. She was like a primitive red savage the way she fought with bare hands and feet, scrapping like a wild cat. The cowboys from whom she had escaped approached warily. She danced away from them. Rush McCullough, who had joined the others against the wall, started forward. Swearing, Spur drove him back again.

Tim shouted, "Okay—leave her be."

He turned to the girl. "What's the trouble, miss? If your brother didn't murder Roan he's got nothing to worry about. If he did—you'd better be on your way."

The girl was panting deeply, without wind to talk. Tim was deeply moved by the strange beauty of her that was so enhanced by the battle she had been putting up. She still crouched as if ready to run. Her eyes swept the semi-circle of cattlemen behind Tim. They were young and tough, most of them. They all had trigger tempers. It was a marvel to her that the night had not already turned into a bloody battle. From what little she had heard of it, Tim Marston had been responsible for maintaining this fragile peace. She owed him something in return.

"That was a cowardly, despicable thing to do," she said, "shooting a man in the back with a shotgun. There's a man—"

She stopped, uncertain of her words.

"What I mean is—are you sure it was one of our people?" she asked. "A man wanted to marry me. He said he'd been offered ten thousand dollars to kill you—"

That was the match that touched off the powder keg. Tim did not know who started shooting—someone behind him that was all he knew. Someone shouted: "Look out, Tim!" It sounded like Sam Bonsell. Then a cowboy opened up with a sixshooter; then others followed. The squatters howled double-cross and broke their lines. Some went over the fence. Others ran for the few wagons that still were left in the yard. More plunged through the open gate.

Rush McCullough dropped the guitar he had been holding and produced a pistol he had been hiding in it during most of the evening. Lying flat on his stomach, he answered the cattleman's gunfire.

In an instant it was over. The wagonyard was cleared. There was no one in sight but Tim Marston, prone there on the ground; and the small curved body of Bess McCullough huddled close to him for protection. There was also a dead Big B cowboy and a dying nester crumpled up against the wall, sobbing.

The slaughter Tim had tried to avoid was now beginning. . . .

The Big B cowboys were reforming their ranks. Sam Bonsell was outside the wagonyard organizing them. Tim could hear Sam shouting. He could hear men hunting through town for escaped nesters. He heard his own two cowboys calling to him.

"You okay, Boss—you okay?"

Tim lay still trying to figure chances. He had to stay flat here. He knew that half the nesters were still in the wagonyard. Some undoubtedly had ammunition. They probably thought he had given a signal to shoot them down. If they got a chance now they would

not hesitate to kill him. It seemed probable to Tim that only the presence of the girl there beside him kept them from shooting at him now. She was using him for protection—but actually she was doing the protecting. Yet Tim said into the dust:

"Go ahead—breeze, kid."

"Joe Gibson—" the girl said. "He was the man—"

"Joe's up there against the pickets howling," Tim said. "Somebody shot him in that first volley."

There was a pattern coming into the undercurrents of this nester war. Joe Gibson had been offered ten thousand dollars to kill Tim. When that fact had come out somebody had shot Joe. He was dying, and he knew who had offered him that money.

"Who was it?" Tim asked the girl.

"He never told me," she said. "Maybe he invented it—I don't know."

Tim said: "Get up and walk out of here. Nobody's going to shoot at a girl. Get your ma and ride for my ranch. Don't slow down for nothing. My boys will take care of you."

The girl started to get up. A shot from the gateway hummed past her head and she dropped flat again in the dust.

Now somebody began shooting from the shadow of the wagons, the bullets clipping bits of log from the gateway. Tim guessed it was Rush McCullough. He had suspected all along that Rush had a sixshooter in that guitar. He had let Rush keep it, believing its presence there would sooner or later make Rush betray himself as the killer of Roan. Rush had seemed too damn innocent to Tim.

Now Tim twisted around. Except for that single shot nobody had tried to hit him or Bess. They were saving their lead, Tim reckoned, for the break. The squatters would go for him—and the cattlemen would try to recapture the girl. He was not so sure now that they would not shoot her.

He waited until the patience of a couple of Big B cowboys gave out. They had found Rush McCullough in the shadows and were potting at him. Another of the half dozen nesters still in the yard had located some shotgun shells. He let go at the gateway with both barrels. Time was running short for Tim and the girl in the middle of the yard.

Tim counted the seconds. He had seen the place where the man hid with the shotgun. He counted the amount of time it would take a clumsy farmer to load up, and when the glow of the dying bonfire glinted on metal, Tim whispered harshly to the girl.

"Run—to the wagons—git—"

The shotgun cleared the gateway. Tim laid down a barrage around the picket fence on the side where the others were forted up. Rush McCullough added his pistol to the uproar and Tim jumped to his feet, dragging the girl up as he did so. She was frozen a second. Then, as if she were a scared calf, Tim slapped Bess smartly on the rump. It got her going. She did not wait for him but skittered off for the shelter of the wagons where Rush was hiding.

Tim went the other way. Crouching low, zig-zagging, Tim ran to the place where the squatters had been lined up. He dropped on his stomach between the wall and Joe Gibson who had fallen away on his face. As he did so a couple shots kicked into Joe, and Joe was dead without telling his story.

Tim lay there cursing into the dust.

After a while the shooting stopped. The bonfire was nearly dead. The wagonyard was almost pitch black and it would be difficult for anyone outside to tell what was shadow, what was man.

Sam Bonsell was shouting for him.

Tim did not answer. Spur and Boston were calling him, too. They were together, on the other side of the gateway from Bonsell, and Tim was sure they neither knew nor suspected what was actually going on here below the surface. It had taken him a long time to catch up with it himself.

Lying there close to the body of Joe Gibson Tim figured out things. Who in this country had ten thousand dollars to offer for killing him? Who, aside from these poverty-stricken nesters could use more graze hereabouts? Who had always looked with envy on his rich land along Silver Creek?

He got the same answer to all these questions, an answer he never could prove unless Joe Gibson would talk. Then he touched Joe, and his hand came away damp and sticky. He found a pool of warm blood. With his forefinger, he started to write in the sand. . . .

★

SAM BONSELL was shouting again: "All we want is McCullough. You bring him out and we'll let the rest of you go. McCullough's the man we want."

Tim could only guess what was going on where McCullough and his sister were forted up. Minutes dragged. These homesteaders had been crossed up once tonight. They were not ready to take a second chance yet.

McCullough did not answer Sam Bonsell. Lantern-light began to dance in the street. Someone tossed an oil-soaked blazing undershirt into the arena. It burned brightly for a moment, but Tim lay still, his eyes closed. He lay spread out beside the body of Joe Gibson.

He heard Spur swearing. "By God—they killed the boss."

Then the light died. There was another conference outside.

"We got dynamite," Sam Bonsell shouted,

"and we'll use it. If you fellers don't come out we'll start in dynamiting."

"Let me have that stick," Spur begged, "for the boss."

The dynamite came over the fence, its wick sputtering. It was a short stick, a persuader, and it landed short of the nesters, exploding with a bang that set Tim's ears to whistling. Small bits of dirt pattered down. Otherwise no damage had been done.

"We'll throw a bigger one next time," Bonsell threatened.

The nesters knew they were licked. They had been beaten ever since Tim Marston had been eliminated from the fight. Though he had been their enemy—he was also their champion.

"There's a girl in here," Rush shouted.

"That's no skin off my nose," Bonsell shouted. "She went in there on her own accord. Okay boys—get a bigger stick ready . . . "

They tossed some more burning waste over the fence to light up the scene and give them a target for their dynamite. A couple seconds passed. Rush McCullough made up his mind.

"You win, Sam," he said. "I'll give myself up if you'll let Bess get into the wagon with Ma and ride out of town and if you'll let the others go free."

"Okay," Sam said. "It's a trade."

Rush said: "One at a time, men. Don't hurry it. Don't bunch up. I'm sending Bess out first. Take our wagon. But don't get into it until you're far enough away to be safe from these sidewinders. If they start acting funny use your guns. You can trust those skunks about as far as you can spit down a prairie dog's hole."

The nesters began moving. Against lantern glow in the street Tim saw Bess pass through the gateway. He heard Ma cry out as the girl appeared on the boardwalk. A moment later a man followed. Another. Eight all told. He heard Sam Bonsell chatting to them cheerfully as they passed, just as if Sam had not a moment ago been trying to dynamite them. Finally Rush went out the entrance with his hands up. Immediately the Big B cowboys ran in to disarm him—and lantern light rushed up to the gateway, converging on the wagonyard. Tim closed his eyes. He lay as still as the motionless dead man beside him.

Bess McCullough was cussing her wagon into motion. Sam Bonsell was chuckling.

"It's goin' to be a great hanging," Sam laughed.

Spur and Boston trotted into the wagonyard. By the redness against his eyelids Tim knew they carried lanterns. He heard their spurs cease their rattling close by him as Boston cursed under his breath.

"Why—the filthy son—why the dirty crossbred shorthorned skunkweed—"

Spur said crisply: "Hold it, boy."

Tim heard Sam coming up. Sam had quit chuckling. Sam was pouring oil into his voice.

"How is he, boys? Just hurt, I hope. Tim sure was a feller with guts. One of my best friends—and his old man before him—"

His speech was clipped short. Tim reckoned the time had come to quit playing possum. Tim rolled over. His fingers tightened on the gun he had been holding so laxly as if in death. He rolled up onto an elbow and looked up at the ring of faces around him beyond the body of Joe Gibson. There were Spur and Boston looking as incredulous as if he were a body risen from the dead. There were others. Chiefly there was Sam Bonsell looking as if he were about to break out crying.

"Why—I never—the lyin' nester—"

"Yeah," Tim said. Tim laughed bitterly. "Roan was my friend, Sam. Even if it was Joe's bullet that got him I ain't paid off my debt to Roan yet."

Sam Bonsell reached for his pistol. He got it out. Tim waited until then, and shot him. He had to use only one bullet.

TIM stood up; wearily he pulled himself up and stood by the outstretched fingers of Joe Gibson. Lantern light showed plainly the words scrawled there in the dust:

"Sam pade me to kil tim."

Tim brushed the dust off his shirt. He leaned down to brush it off his pants. For a second he stared. He had forgotten that Joe Gibson was left-handed. Spur was standing directly above Joe's left hand. Tim had not been the only note writer that night.

Joe had written: "Sam shot me the dog."

Tim pretended to faint. He stumbled against Spur. Spur held him up and in the melee something happened to the words Joe Gibson had actually written. Tim regained his balance.

"Kinda dizzy," he said. "Uh—how about a drink, boys?"

They walked out to the boardwalk. The McCullough wagon had gone only a few feet and halted. The girl was staring toward the gateway, her eyes big as a child's.

"Maybe they have some tea in the Forty-Rod," Tim grinned to her. "Bring Ma along. I'll get the boys to bring Rush up there."

He walked with a freer stride.

That little girl had salt in her craw as well as sand. She would make a wonderful wife for a rancher.

How, he wondered, does a cowboy go about sparking a bare-footed girl? He reckoned he could learn.

THE END

★ ★ RED WAR HITS THE

When the forgotten small trappers declared relentless war on the gluttonous Great Northern Peltry Company, they never dreamed that the Carcajou, deadly phantom of the Northland, would glide like an avenging wraith along their trail!

CHAPTER ONE

Seventh Man

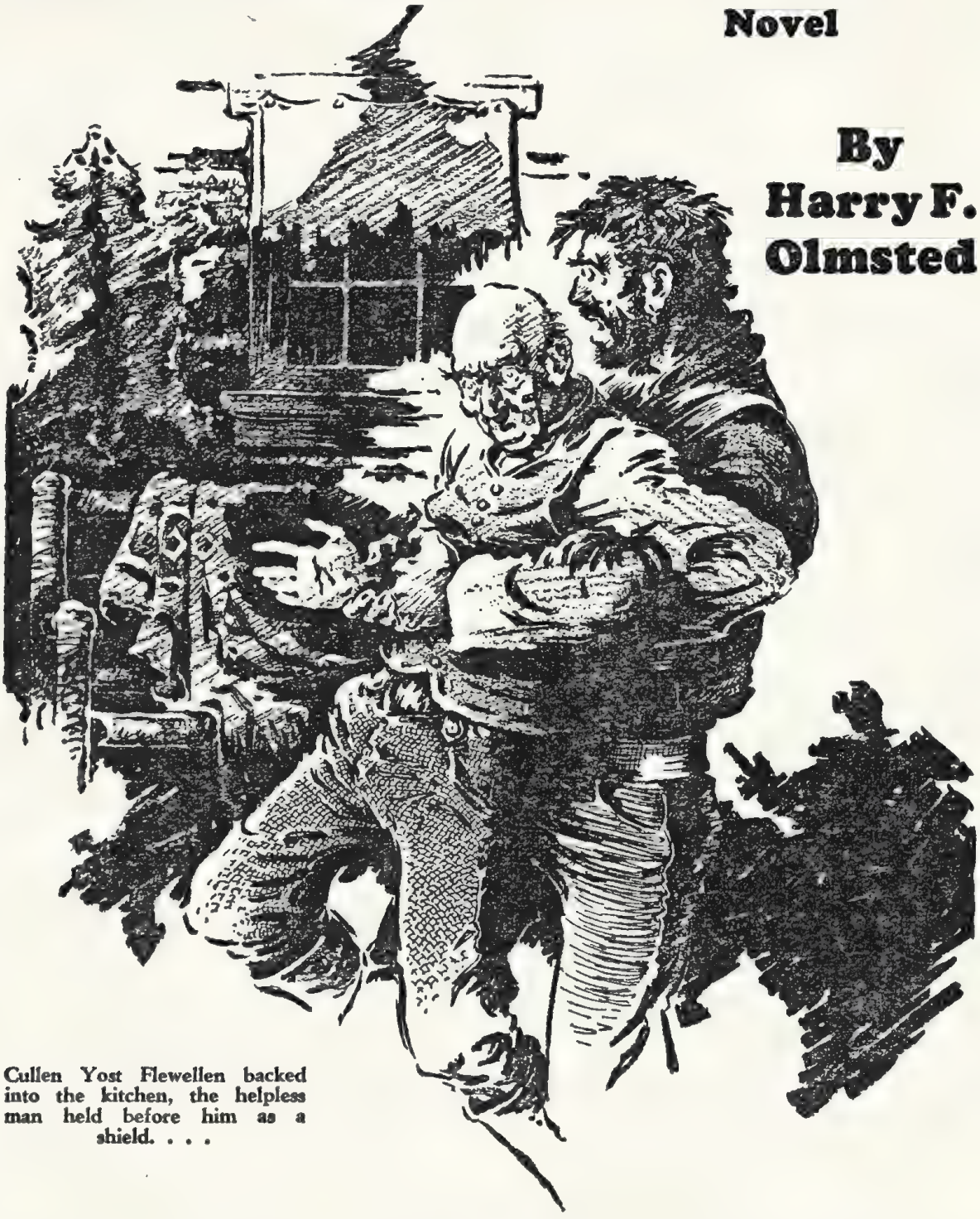
THESE names wrote themselves into Northwest history: Great Northern Fur and Peltry Company and Le Carcajou—the killer who broke the gluttonous company's stranglehold on the wilderness. Witness, too, the forgotten factors who were the bone and sinew and muscle of Great Northern, the nameless trappers who were the nerve system. Then there was Peter Bendamon, grim, soft-worded, silent; and Pierre Belette, dainty limbed, weasel-swift, explosive. These two were partners in a common hatred, champions of the persecuted Independents—trappers before the tidal wave of Great Northern's greed crushed them. They did not make the pages of history, but. . . .

A brawling wind slashed down from the north, wailing through the straining pines and gnashing at the weathered log structures at Castle Crossing Post, on Salmon River.

FUR TRAILS

A Carcajou Novel

By Harry F. Olmsted



Cullen Yost Flewellen backed into the kitchen, the helpless man held before him as a shield. . . .

Rain and sleet rode that gale, pelting the north exposures cruelly, splashing off the roofs in noisy torrents. Secure from all this, six men hugged the roaring stove in the trading post, sipping hot rum.

These men were not at ease. King Passey, owner of this post, paced restlessly, ears straining for sounds alien to the storm, his eyes ever flicking to the great hewn door that rattled under the wind's clubbing blasts.

Passey's five guests shifted nervously in their chairs. One of them protested, plaintively. "For cripes' sake, King, sit down. You make me jumpy. Why all the mystery? Who

is this seventh man we're waiting here for?"

"Patience, boys." King Passey looked at his heavy watch. "Only way I could reach him was by mocassin telegraph. This evening was the deadline I set for him. If he's not here in half an hour, we'll take up our business without him."

They took it soberly, watching him resume his pacing, sipping their drinks. A gust of wind struck the post shudderingly, taking out an oilskin pane. Wind poured into the room, fetching rain and snuffing the tallow dip. All hands rushed to answer Passey's call for help in rigging an emergency blind. While they struggled, the door burst open and the gale swirled through.

"Somebody shut an' bar that door," roared Passey, fighting to get the blind hung. "What a hell of a night!"

As if in answer, the door slammed shut. Now the blind was hung and the room was calm again. In total darkness, King Passey felt his way to the dip, made a light. The beam pushed back the blackness and Passey and his guests were looking at two men who stood just inside the entrance, their fringed buckskins dripping.

One, tall and splendidly proportioned, shook water from his weasel cap, his close-cropped tawny hair glistening in the candle light. Cold, colorless eyes touched each one, lingering on Passey. "You sent for me," he said, simply.

Passey nodded. "Good," he said, fervently. "Gentlemen, this is Peter Bendamon. Peter, meet five men with a will to accept war against Great Northern."

Passey's five guests were surprised, and showed it. They were pleased, too. Not a man in fur who hadn't heard the growing legend of this young warrior, broken by Great Northern and committed to undying war against them.

Their eyes curious, they watched him glide to the stove, lay out his pistols to dry. Not a glance was spared for the slight, swart man at the doorway, the drenched little man with the bright, almost gay features and the stringy black hair falling from his beaver *capote*.

Now Peter Bendamon straightened from attending his weapons and acknowledged the introductions. There was Whistler Wilt—two hundred miles from his Muddy Lake Post. Blackmer Poe was captain of a free brigade which trapped the Caribous and Tetons. Groton Walker was down from his far Big Hole Post. Racine Remsen, whose Bitterroot interests had long attracted Great Northern, held the shadows of his struggle in his eyes. Lastly there was Benham Bishop, boss of Vinegar Springs Post. Sparks seemed to fly when he and Peter locked glances, as when flint and steel clash. That's how they were—Bishop flint; Peter cold, sharp steel.

★

THE young nemesis of Great Northern inclined his head as each name was spoken, smiling faintly. "Always glad to meet and help those under the heel of the Company," he said, quietly. "Many talk of fighting Great Northern. Few fight. Fewer survive, if they take the step. Many give up and get out. Some count Great Northern money and add to the long odds against the Independents."

Benham Bishop finished fixing two glasses of hot rum, took one to the silent little man at the doorway, handed the other to Peter Bendamon. His laugh was full and loud. "Every man here," he said, heartily, "has been hurt too much to ever accept anything from Great Northern but . . . death. You can count heavily on us, Bendamon, to the limit of our resources."

Peter Bendamon grimaced. "I count heavily on none, gentlemen. The man who depends on himself knows who to blame if he loses. Take Pierre Belette—" He pointed to the grinning diminutive who had not moved from his place at the door, who stropped a wicked looking knife against the heel of his hand. "Known as the Weasel, he lives only to suck the blood of Great Northern. Yet I dare not trust him. Eh, Pierre?"

"Oui, oui." The Canuck spun the knife upward, caught it deftly and dropped it into its sheath. "And I trust nobody, me. Yet I love M'sieu Bendamon lak a brother, *mes hommes,* and I guard heem wiz my life."

The exchange was made flippantly, yet behind it was a dread seriousness and an affection that warmed their eyes. Peter Bendamon grew chill again. "Your experience is the usual pattern, gentlemen. Resenting Great Northern greed, refusing to be party to their lust, you are raided, your caches and cubbies robbed, your trappers bribed, frightened away or murdered. Hiding the knife of treachery behind the bible of fair dealing, the factors turn the Indians against you. But are you sure your righteous anger is not being mistaken for a will to fight? . . . No? Then what do you plan?"

King Passey seemed astonished. "Good Lord, Bendamon, that is why I called on you. We'll back you with money, arms, supplies, men, anything but leadership. We look to you for that."

"Speaking for the group," put in Benham Bishop, "I venture to offer you half the first year's net take, after you've helped us out from under Great Northern's shadow. You men go along with me on that?"

Their swift agreement amused the man out-

lawed by Great Northern. "That sounds like you plan direct assault, gentlemen. Were the Independents to lump their combined strength, they would still fall far behind Great Northern. We must attack and withdraw, attack and withdraw, hitting the enemy in vulnerable spots, sapping his strength, filling him with terror and the eventual belief that he is fighting a losing fight. Any help I might be to you can not be measured in profit."

"We'll raise the ante, Bendamon," said King Passey. "Name your price."

"You mistake me, gentlemen. Despite the legend, I am a kindly man soured by abuse. My fight against Great Northern is personal, not a means of livelihood. When they challenged my competition, I accepted, gladly. When they entered my post, took my ailing father as a hostage for my future good behavior, I commenced paying them back in coin of their own minting."

"You . . . you never found your father?" asked Passey, softly.

"I've never halted the search, which may erplain why I've answered your call. Let me hear your problem, that I may see where I fit into it."

"Each of us has a different problem," said King Passey. "Here, I have the season's cache. There are two choices. Either take it on muleback to the rendezvous at Musselshell Crossing, or boat it down the Salmon to the Snake and thence to the rendezvous at Grande Ronde. Either way, the odds are heavy that Great Northern will wind up with my fur."

Peter Bendamon drained his glass. "That means they will be watching you. Now where is the nearest Great Northern Post, and who is the factor?"

"Crooked Creek Post—twelve miles away as the crow flies, twenty miles by river or trail. August Bisonette built the post five years ago. He was succeeded last year by a man named Flewellen—Yost Flewellen. Once a man could go there to trade. Now the trails are guarded and God help the man they catch without a legitimate reason for being there."

"Yost Flewellen!" Peter Bendamon started, his eyes flicking to the suddenly lighted ones of Pierre Belette. They saw Peter's chest heave and fires kindle in his pale eyes. A flush touched the high points of his cheeks. "To help you," he said, "I must look the ground over, with a view of finding a way inside. Hold your furs till you hear from me."

"If that's all you want," said Benham Bishop, "there is small use in waiting. I can get you into Crooked Creek Post."

Peter Bendamon leaned over to pick up his pistols and prime them. When they were pouched, he looked at Bishop, smiling a wintry little smile. "That is a new one, gentlemen. How many of you have *entre* there?"

He saw the quick flash of trouble across their features, and the lightning shift of their glances toward Bishop. The boss of Vinegar Springs Post laughed, with an unpleasant sound. "I am the only one, Bendamon. The rest have split with Flewellen and are on his list. I was summoned here by Great Northern, to discuss with Flewellen the terms of turning over my post to them. I'm keeping the deal on the fire while I learn all I can that may be of help to us."

"What have you learned?" Peter was standing stock still, blinking a bit.

Bishop choked over his drink, until his face was fiery red. Then he jerked: "Oh, ways in and out of the place; how many men and batteaux, guns; how much fur of their own, how much stolen from Independent trap lines. I've got plenty that will help us once we move against them. But you . . . what do you propose to do in there?"

"Learn all those things first hand, Bishop. You can show me, after getting me in. Shall we say I'm the new owner of Castle Crossing Post, a more friendly and co-operative man than King Passey."

Bishop shrugged. "Suits me. Of course if they have reason to doubt it, they will kill you . . . and me too, likely. When do you want to go?"

"Where can we meet you tomorrow afternoon—at sundown?"

"We?" Bishop scowled at Pierre Belette. "I didn't agree to get him inside the stockade. You said you couldn't trust him; why should I?"

"I vouch for him," said the outlaw, "even though he doesn't say why he makes war on Great Northern. When he's ready, he'll reveal the reason."

"Oui," grinned the voyageur, savagely. "Pierre plenty tired of dose mans dat rob trap, kill trappaire. Pierre lak teeckle heem wiz knife, hear heem scream. *Voila ce que c'est."* He was leering at Bishop as he said it.

The man sat down, shuddering and wiping his brow.

"No matter," he said, huskily. "I don't trust him. I won't have him along. You—" Bishop looked into the twin points of ice that were Peter Bendamon's eyes. "I will meet you at four tomorrow afternoon, where the river trail tops out on the basalt bluff, five miles from here. Satisfactory?"

"I shall be there," said Peter Bendamon, tonelessly. Then to King Passey: "Prepare to take out the fur by river. Load the *batteaux*. You will hear from me."

He seemed to glide to the door, Pierre following like a shadow. The panel opened and slammed shut. Candle flame jumped on the wick and the pair were gone into the storm.

The seventh man had come and gone. And an eighth, whose knife thirsted for blood.

King Passey sighed, as if relieved. He rose and stretched. "Funny they'd duck out into that storm instead of putting up here. No accounting for tastes. Anyhow, I think we're going to get some fur out, so we better get some rest."

"Yes," echoed Benham Bishop. "This looks like a good night's work."

CHAPTER TWO

Crooked Creek Post

THE RAIN had ceased. The wind had fallen. The sun was setting in a dark bank of clouds in the west and the air was raw. Winter died hard on the Salmon.

A wild land this, thought Peter Bendamon as he climbed the slippery trail to his place of meeting with Bishop. A land of pine-studded ridges, brushy canyons and bottomlands. A fur paradise settled by King Passey on the heels of the early fur brigades, turned now into a green hell by Great Northern Fur. Lonely now, with everything dripping, it seemed totally unpeople. Peter knew better.

Climbing effortlessly, Peter paused just short of timber's edge, where he looked out on a rocky head dropping sheer to the river. Somewhere a cock partridge drummed. Peter smiled, answered. A moment later Pierre came in from quite another direction, silent as a wraith. He wore a very pleased look.

"*Mon Dieu,* w'at fun," he sighed, leaning on his long rifle. "I am slip along lak fox w'en . . . *pouf!* Lak dat, a man jump out and point wiz ze gon. Where I go, he ask. I tal heem where he go. Boom . . . he eshoot! I knock ze gon down, keeck heem in ze neck. He get up wiz knife. *Bien,* we fight. *Nom de nom,* w'at a fight. W'en he drop knife, I keel heem. Zat ees all."

"You sinner," said Peter, bleakly.

"Sinner?" Pierre acted hurt. "*Pardieu,* you not lak Pierre's help? You not 'ave eet eef somebody eshoot heem. So . . . *voila—*" he spread his hands—"you still 'ave me to help you, *mon ami.*"

"And all the best of the bargain, my bloodthirsty weasel," grinned Peter. "Now what about Crooked Creek Post? You get in?"

The Canuck shook his head. "No. Guards thick as fleas but Pierre get close to gate. Learn many things."

"What things, Pierre?"

"I find ze water gate. W'en eet ees dark, Pierre dive and . . . *preste* . . . he ees een ze post. Ze fur warehouse she ees by ze water gate. Inside ees many bad fightaire. Two of zem Pierre know."

"Who?"

Pierre spat. "Glarney Geer and Rene Brigance."

"Shifty killers, both," rapped Peter. "The sort Flewellen favors to protect his backtrail. What about Bishop? See him?"

"*Oui.* Flewellen greet heem lak long lost brothaire. *Camarades.* I theenk thees Bishop she ees *bien plus perfide*—a traitor."

Peter's eyes sparkled. "Great Northern's got several men watching the river. And there's a land cutoff from the post to the Salmon that would intercept any *batteaux* discovered. Now you go back to King Passey. Tell him to shove his loaded *batteaux* down to the mouth of Crooked Creek and hold 'em there till I come, even if he has to fight. Tell him to fetch paddlers for another fur boat."

"*Hein?*" Pierre scratched his head, puzzled. "W'at fur boat I tell heem zis is, *mon compagnon?*"

"The boat I bring out of Crooked Creek Post, of course. The fur Great Northern's stolen from Passey since first frost. And, Pierre, you stay with Passey's outfit. See him through. If there's a fight, they'll need you."

The little Canuck scowled. "Maybe Pierre stay wiz heem, maybe not. Maybe you need Pierre more zan Passey. Maybe I let dose Passey faller fight alone while I dive under ze water gate. *Adieu. . . .*"

His voice fell away and he was gone into the brush. Peter Bendamon, staring after him, was half annoyed, half amused. He and Pierre had been through a lot together, yet he understood the Canuck hardly at all. Together they had been a perfectly operating team, yet never once had Pierre hinted at his reasons for hating Great Northern, or for the restlessness that drove him. Never once had he spoken of his loyalty to a man whose betrayal would net him a thousand dollars of Great Northern Company's bloodstained reward money.

Peter shook off the inertia engendered by his thoughts, filled his lungs and glided through the failing light toward the basalt rim. The tang of tobacco smoke stung his nostrils, led him to Benham Bishop. The man sat at the brink, staring down a hundred feet to the murmuring Salmon. He bounced up when Peter spoke his name.

"I'd almost given you up," he scowled. "It's almost dark. We'll have a hell of a time stumbling along that black trail up Crooked Creek. Come on."

He led the way and Peter strode easily behind him, every sense alert to the dangers that seemed to stalk with this man who might be playing either one or both of two desperate games. They dropped off the basaltic head on the Crooked Creek side, caught a trail angling off through deep timber. Night came thundering down, the blackness becoming so

dense that only by feeling could they make their way. Bishop was again cursing Peter for being so late, when there was a challenge flung from the gloom ahead. "Stop. Who there?"

Bishop caught his breath, then: "That you, Kalistuxon."

"Me Kalistuxon. Who you?"

"Ben Bishop and a friend."

"Hmmm, good. You come."

A giant shadow materialized before them and they followed him, single file. And again Peter's mind was busy with memories, ghosts of the past. Kalistuxon. The giant Flathead chief and his warriors had been in the neighborhood of Bendamon Post, on Flathead Lake, when Freeman Bendamon was taken from his bed. Running down every clue, Peter had gone to the Indian village, far up the lake. After denying knowledge of Freeman Bendamon, the chief had fallen sullen and silent. His attack was treacherous and deadly, leaving scars on Peter that he would carry to his grave.

Fighting back savagely, using speed to nullify the giant's terrible strength, Peter had worn the chief down, beat him to an unconscious, bleeding wreck. Then, unharmed by the awed tribesmen Peter had stalked from the village. And he had never ceased to believe Kalistuxon knew plenty about the abduction.

That seemed to be borne out now by the giant's presence here with Flewellen. At the time of Freeman Bendamon's disappearance, Flewellen had been factor of Great Northern's Swan River Post, commanding the fur approaches to Flathead Lake. He had been replaced before Peter could get there. His successor had denied any knowledge of Flewellen's whereabouts but admitted that Freeman Bendamon was being held as a hostage for Peter's future allegiance to Great Northern.

Afterward, while carrying war to Great Northern outposts, Peter had felt more than a few qualms, questioning his right to thus jeopardize the safety of his sire. Now, about to meet both guilty ones face to face, he felt joy, like a heady wine, go tumbling through his veins.

* * *

Low-burning fires cast dancing shadows on Shoshone teepees outside Crooked Creek Post stockade. Sheepeater Shoshones ringed the fires, dipping into hot kettles to sate their appetities, and those of their countless dogs. The always famished canines were so intent upon the feeding they made no outcry when Kalistuxon, Bishop and Peter slid past the teepees toward the gate.

At their approach, the guard at the gate jumped up, leveled his rifle, relaxing when he recognized the towering figure of the Indian. They walked past him without words. Inside the stockade, Bishop muttered: "Still want to pose as the new owner of Castle Crossing Post?"

"That's good enough reason for my being here. Use the name Peters—Ben Peters."

"Ben Peters it is."

They continued on across the trading ground, shadowed by upturned *batteaux* being recalked for the long river trip with the season's fur take. Quarters and habitations ringed the enclosure except at the west side, where the water gate gave to Crooked Creek between the ends of two gaunt warehouses. A roofed arcade fronted the buildings, a walk underneath it. Lights showed here and there about the enclosure, dimmed by the dusty oilskin panes.

They passed in under the arcade, their mocassins snicking on the gravel walk. Bishop fell back until he strode with Peter, shoulder to shoulder. Kalistuxon seemed to lengthen his stride and from his lips issued a low but very piercing whistle, like the call of a night bird.

Shock ran through Peter and a chill swept up his body. He halted. Benham Bishop's left hand flashed out to fasten Peter's right, and he was drawing a pistol.

"Steady, Bendamon! This is the end of your blood-blazed trail. Stand as you are, for you're worth as much to me dead as alive."

★

IT SEEMED then that the tempo of life changed and Peter saw a score of things with an objective and detached interest. Down in the corner of the compound a door opened; a big man was silhouetted against candle light and then was blotted out as he slammed the panel shut behind him. His husky voice came strangely through the blackness. "That you, Ben? You got him?"

"Here's your man, Flewellen. Come get him."

The Post was not asleep. It was waiting breathlessly for this. Of a sudden, lights winked off behind those panes, and doors creaked as men debouched into the quadrangle. Reason gave way to instinct in Peter. He kicked savagely at Bishop's feet and chopped down on his gun arm with the tensed heel of his hand. Bishop went down, squawling with fear, and Peter whirled back toward the main gate of the stockade.

But men were abroad down there, running toward him, spreading as they came. Blocked there, Peter spun back to find Kalistuxon barring the way. He bumped that giant figure, shoulder on and with his full weight, striking savagely with the barrel of his pistol. Hur-

dling the falling Flathead, Peter ploughed down the arcade but was turned out into the trading ground by a rush of men from the darkened quarters.

It seemed that was where they wanted him, for suddenly bedlam struck the post. Mushrooming flashes of muzzle flame. Reverberating roar of guns. Bullets kicking up their infernal clatter. And over all, the smash and pound of Flewellen's mad exhortations.

A bullet clipped the running Peter's calf and he fell, rolling. A horn blew hoarsely and the firing ceased. Men came running from all sides. And Flewellen came from the factor's house. Peter could make out the size of him by the sheen of his clay-whitened buckskins. His arm was upflung and Peter knew he held a gun.

As in any gamble, it takes a further, bolder gamble to recoup a loss. Peter cast caution aside, put everything into his sprint. Flewellen's arm came whipping down. Gunfire blazed in Peter's face, but there was no pain, no wound, and he gloated as he smashed into that big, solid man.

The impact threw them both down. Peter lit rolling, came to his feet running. He was off balance and fell again as bullets stormed over his head. They were on him then and he struck and kicked as men bludgeoned him. Explosions were still beating from wall to wall and men were crying out for identifications. A mad, weird, incredible struggle—men fighting without knowledge or sight of whom they struck. Frenzy driving them, and the lust for a thousand dollars—more money than they could make in a whole bitter season on the traplines.

Out of this melee Peter crawled and slugged and clawed his way, gaining his feet and sprinting the sixty or seventy feet to the shadows of the warehouses. They were after him like hounds and, certain that they would expect him to try for the water gate, Peter swerved left into the black, ten-foot slot between buildings and stockade wall. The chase swelled behind and Peter muttered: "It's not him. It's not the Yost Flewellen I knew at Swan River Post."

He paused a split second to try Flewellen's rear door. Finding it locked, he continued on, turned into a narrow, drafty avenue between buildings and so came again to the compound. The manhunt had poured between the warehouses, washing the *engages* with it. Hawk eyes might be watching, but now was the time for another gamble, and Peter made it. Unchallenged, he entered Flewellen's front door, dropped the bar.

He stood in a small hall, lighted by a guttering tallow dip. Three doors gave from this vestibule and Peter eyed them speculatively. So much depended upon his luck in the choice. Still heaving from his effort in the compound, he gripped his pistol and opened the right hand door.

Peter found himself in a long beamed room of rustic birch and grizzly rugs. The only light came from a small fire dancing on the hearth. The place reeked of an unnerving loneliness yet, as Peter moved warily toward the fire, he discovered the motionless man in the deep chair, facing the blaze.

The man seemed to be sleeping, yet when Peter bent over to study the face, the eyes were open—hateful, green-tinted eyes that seemed to burn into Peter's brain. He stepped back, embarrassed, confused, wary of the man's hands, covered by a mink robe. "I suppose," he murmured, "I should ask you to pardon the intrusion."

The glittery-eyed man neither answered nor moved. Fearful of hidden weapons, Peter snatched away the robe. Nothing there but wasted legs and pale, corpse-like hands. He noticed then the pallid, marble-like skin, the snow-white hair. Disease had put the stamp of death upon this man, blighting him with some numbing paralysis.

Never forgetting, for all the danger involved, the quest that drove him, Peter set about searching the still house, his ears cocked for intermittent echoes of the manhunt outside. The house was too scrupulously clean and tidy to be man-tended. Each room was lighted, each softened by a woman's touch. One room, redolent with faint perfume, held bed, chairs and a woman's toilet table. Shamed, he retired. The kitchen still smelled of the evening meal though everything was spotlessly clean. Lack of occupants puzzled him and he returned to the room where the living dead man sat. But now he was not alone. A woman sat on the arm of his chair, her hand in his. A pretty girl, looking at him with eyes that were unafraid, smiling scornfully.

"Well, Mister Bendamon. You have searched our house; did you find it at all profitable?"

Peter flushed, let his eyes feast further on her before he attempted to answer. She was free-limbed, straight and supple in her Shoshone buckskins. Her eyes were snapping black, her hair ebon and her lips—cherry red and pursed unfavorably upon him—were made for smiling. She was more than pretty, he reflected, and recalled the gangling slip of a girl who had played with the Indian boys at Swan River Post, a few short years ago.

"You have grown up, Marie . . . quite attractively."

For a moment she was silent, the spell of an ancient epoch catching her memory. Then: "A pretty speech from a self-appointed guardian of furland law, punisher of real or

fancied culprits without trial; killer and violater of homes. Once you were a shy-eyed boy, Peter, giving little promise of becoming a rascal that even the Carcajou can match." She scorned him, bitterly.

"Like all the rest," he said, "you swallow all the witches tales, evil gossip and lies. Any man I ever punished was tried and convicted, by fire. I never killed a man except in self defense. Nor have I ever violated a home except, as with yours, to take refuge from men gone mad with the lust for blood money. Listen." Through the heavy walls struck the thin and ominous note of baffled manhunters.

A rasp of breath came from the paralytic and Peter saw a faint tremoring of his index finger in the girl's palm. It ceased now and the girl translated the message. "My father says your claiming refuge here does not explain your presence in a Great Northern post. You are an outlaw, with a price on your head for the lawless things you have done against the Company. He asks what you came here to do."

"Then that is Yost Flewellen, Marie?" Peter was astounded. "Who then is the Flewellen who almost bagged me outside?"

"You avoid the question, Peter. You were never nearer death, so I advise you to tell the truth. Why did you come here?"

Peter came to the hard truth. "I came seeking a hostage held by Great Northern Fur. I came, defying the death your cruel factors believe they have the right to deal out."

"Cruel factors?" She snorted. "Business is cruel. Life is cruel. Look about you and you'll see that cruelty is a matter of point of view. And to hostages—" She blinked. "My father holds no hostages."

Peter's face settled, grew grim. "Ask him what he does with his hostages."

Again the index finger tapped out its message. Again the girl translated. "He asks that you name the one you are seeking."

Peter's eyes glowed redly in the gloom. "Why not?" he said, bitterly, "although he knows the answer before he asks it. I came here for Freeman Bendamon, Marie, prepared to kill your father if he dared admit he held no hostages. But killing would be a favor to him. Perhaps I shall give him a taste of what he gave me—take you with me so he shall never see you again. Ask him again what he does with his hostages."

CHAPTER THREE

The Living Dead Man

THE paralytic's eyes filled with fury and his finger quivered faster. The girl grew pale and when she spoke her voice trembled. "He orders you to surrender your pistols and throw yourself upon the mercy of Great Northern law. You will be fairly tried."

"Great Northern knows no such thing as fair trial. Your father has forgotten the meaning of the word mercy. I put my trust in my weapons."

"Then I am ordered to open the door and call in the men. You are one; they are many. You can't escape. Do you still refuse?"

Peter laughed, rising temper hardening him. "If I was half as bad as you picture me, Marie, you'd know I would never let you get to that door. Or, if I did, I would never let Yost Flewellen live to see what happens here."

She hesitated, breathing hard, terribly pale. The paralytic was beating out his order in her palm, an order she dared not obey. And while she suffered over her choice there came a heavy impact against the front door, then an insistent pounding. Peter's eyes found the girl's. "Who would that be?"

"It is Kalistuxon, our servant."

"What does he want?"

She listened to the muffled echoes. "He has a prisoner."

Peter nodded. "Let him in," he ordered, and backed toward a communicating door leading into the kitchen. "I will be where I can watch, so let your conscience be your guide as to what you tell him." A faint, cutting smile touched his straight lips. "I pay for everything I get; I give away nothing."

She stood watching him back into the kitchen, wrestling with her fears. And when he had snuffed the dip, plunging the kitchen into darkness, she still stood there, shuddering at each blow Kalistuxon rained upon the panel. And all the while that finger in her palm beat its steady tattoo.

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Now the girl dropped her father's pale hand and she was gone from Peter's sight. He heard the Indian complain as he stepped into the house and, a moment later Marie came again to stand beside her father. Then Kalistuxon came into view—a grotesque giant with long, greasy black hair and a forehead sloped sharply back on the angle of his prominent nose. A pistol was in his hand. That weapon was thrust into the back of a man who looked tiny and fragile beside him. It was not hard to recognize Pierre Belette, the weasel, despite his beaten, bloody features and the torn buckskin shirt hanging over one bared shoulder.

"Who is he?" demanded Marie Flewellen.

"Him bad enemy," grunted the Flathead. "Him Carcajou."

The girl recoiled and from his vantage Peter smiled thinly. With that mop of black hair streaming about his bruised and swollen face, Pierre could be forgiven for being mistaken for the greatly feared and seldom-seen killer of the wilderness. Peter could have stepped out then and, under the menace of his guns, freed the little Canuck. But something bigger than himself held him where he was, beside the barred rear door.

Marie asked: "How do you know it's the Carcajou? Where did you find him?"

"Catch him try steal fur in warehouse," said the Indian. "Boss say him come steal fur, kill you, boss, me . . . ever'body. *Hmmm,* tomorrow him die, boss say."

Kalistuxon turned to the wall, at the end of the stone pile of the fireplace. Marie cried out: "No, Kalistuxon! Don't—"

But she was late. The Flathead had touched some spring and a secret door had popped open. He turned about, his beady black eyes darting from the girl to her father and back again. He must have read something in Yost Flewellen's restless eyes, and in the girl's pallor. He said: "Boss say put him in cell. Me do. Me come back."

He prodded Pierre through the secret doorway, disappearing after him. Minutes dragged. Kalistuxon appeared again, stooping as he emerged, closed the panel carefully. His face was like a rock, his jet eyes darting about the room like those of an aroused serpent. "Kalistuxon know," he mumbled, "why you so scared. Other man—Bendamon—him not escape. Him in here."

"No, Kalistuxon," the girl lied gallantly. "No, you're wrong."

"Him here," repeated the Flathead. "Me go get boss."

He turned to the door. Peter, with added reason now for not being trapped here, lifted the bar, swung the panel silently. For a long minute he keened the night, his nostrils working. Then he slipped outside, closing the door behind him.

If the dragnet which had trapped Pierre still persisted, its fury had burned out. The Post was quiet, too quiet. Even after Kalistuxon had found and apprised the one he called "bus," there was still no sound. It was plain the manhunters had learned that their own bawdy tempers, their tumult and their ravening, had defeated them. Flattened against the stockade, Peter felt his way along the upright, pike-sharpened logs to the angle of the wall, thinking only to remove himself to a safe distance from the factor's house. He heard Flewellen's rear door open as he found the tiny door in the heavy wall. Peter slipped outside, pulled the door to as a new manhunt, infinitely more dangerous than the first, spread outward from the factor's house.

They did not discover the slipped latch as they passed, else getting back in would have been a problem for Peter. Ear to the ground, he knew when they had passed, and stepped back inside. His hope now was the back door. Had they barred it?

That question intrigued Peter more than the more important one of a guard. The man flattened against the recessed panel must have heard the faint rasp of Peter's buckskins against the logs. Suddenly he stepped forth, grunted: "Ah-ha!" and his leveled musket blared a livid streak of light at Peter. The bullet passed between his arm and his body, searing both like a white-hot coal. And then the man was upon him, screaming: "Here he is! I got him; I got him!"

Weapon empty, the guard came in with the long barrel swinging. Peter went under it, closed with his foe. A quick, straining test of strength, with the guard loosing his firearm and trying for the knife at his middle. He was fast and he was strong. He got the knife out and Peter just did recoil from the arcing sweep of it. The man missed by fractions . . . and died, with Peter's own blade in his throat.

Men were close now, coming at a run, crying for details. Peter took time to break a quill of castor, sprinkle it over the dead man. Wiping and sheathing his blade, he tried the door. It stood a crack ajar. Peter stepped inside, dropped the bar and braced himself for attack from within. There was no sound or movement. The house, as when he had entered it first, was hushed.

Pistol ready, Peter hurried into the great living room. The fire burned low. Yost Flewellen still sat there, more like a corpse than a man. Nobody else was in the room and Peter went to the secret panel. The tiny spring catch was simple to operate and a moment later, guided by a faint beam of light, he was letting himself down a steep staircase.

A candle burned low, as in the rest of this

house where the inmates feared the dark, its faint rays striking through the stout spruce bars set in floor and ceiling. Between those bars a puffed and wistful face peered. A whisper: *"Mon Dieu,* am I making ze dream? Or is zis *mon ami,* Peter Bendamon—wheech ees ze bes' damn fightaire een ze *Nord?"*

Peter unfastened the chain that held down the bar. "What happened to you?"

"Helas," sighed the Canuck. "I am ashame' I fight so bad, *mon compagnon.* I keel only three, maybe four before zey overcome me. And jus' w'en I 'ave ze boats ready to load wiz Great Northern fur—"

"Serves you right for not doing as I told you. Sometime you will really spoil a play and get us both killed." Peter threw the cell door open. "Out with you, and up the stairs. Into the darkened room on your right . . . and silently."

The Canuck caught his hands, clung for a moment in an ecstacy of gratitude. Peter gave him the knife he had taken from the dead man out back. Then Pierre was gliding up the stairs. Peter waited until he was at the top, then he blew out the light, felt his own way upward. Carefully, he peered out. The big room was empty, silent. Peter ghosted out, closed the panel and passed under the fiercely glaring eyes of the helpless paralytic to the kitchen. He whispered Pierre's name. There was no answer.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Carcajou!

A MURMUR of voices outside the rear door drew Peter. He pressed his ear to the panel. A thin voice argued vehemently. "I tell you it is the Carcajou. He's fouled his kill . . . smell it? Phee-ew!"

"It can't be," protested the heavy-voiced man known to Peter only as the boss. "We've got Carcajou tucked away neatly in a cell. Tomorrow I'll really put on a show for those who have feared him. This is a trick."

"A trick of that Flathead Injun," said someone, sourly. "Your Carcajou is loose again, Flewellen."

Flewellen! Peter was puzzling over that when the man swore. "By all the pestle-tailed gods, I'll find out. If he's escaped, I'll take that Injun's hair. I've been getting suspicious of . . . hey, what's that?"

From somewhere, muted by the heavy walls, came a chorus of thin yells and a fusillade of gunfire. Heavier yells gave answer and battle raged within the stockade. Flewellen cried: "It's the Independents, egged on by that Bendamon. The hand of that sharp-tongued Marie's in this somewhere too. Don't like the way she's been acting about me taking over here. Geer, Brigance, Bishop, you come with me. Rest of you get down there and clean out this fool attack."

They were gone then and Peter was turning as someone slid into the room like a ghost. He thought it was Pierre until he saw her silhouetted against the faint glow of the fire. "Marie," he whispered, and she came to him.

"You should not have come back here, Peter," she said, sternly. "He is coming here with his ruffians. If they find you here, they will kill you."

"I can believe that," chuckled Peter. "Who is this man they call boss?"

"A second cousin to my father. Cullen Yost Flewellen—a human devil who is making us hated in every corner of furland."

"Your father's chickens coming home to roost, eh Marie?"

"My father," she said sadly, "is a helpless old man who is dead except for a brain poisoned by fear and hate. He has nothing to say about the business. Some day, I fear, he will be killed. When that day comes, Cullen Yost Flewellen cannot afford to leave me alive."

"He is the one who took Freeman Bendamon as a hostage?"

"No. Father did that, believing it the only way he could control your influencing the trappers against Great Northern."

"Punishment for preaching independence," said Peter, bitterly. "Where is my father?"

"Dead, Peter. Buried just outside the stockade." Sensing him stiffen and feeling the necessity of explanation, she went on. "It was not torture, as you probably suppose. Nor ill treatment. Not an execution. Freeman Bendamon was stubborn, refusing to send you a letter urging you to affiliate with Great Northern. Though a peaceful Quaker, his hate of my father grew to an obsession. I shall never forget the night they fought. I was here alone, the men being away with the boats. The room was locked and they fought or hours. All I could do was to pray."

She paused, trembling, then went doggedly on. "When all was still, I went through a window. Freeman Bendamon was dead. My father was dead of body, only his hate of the name Bendamon living on. That and fear of your vengeance . . ." her words tailed out in a draft of breath. The front door had opened. Cullen Yost Flewellen was entering with men who knew only how to serve death. Marie grasped Peter by the arms. "You must leave," she whispered.

"You come with me," he begged. "When they find Pierre gone from that cell downstairs, they will take it out on you and your father."

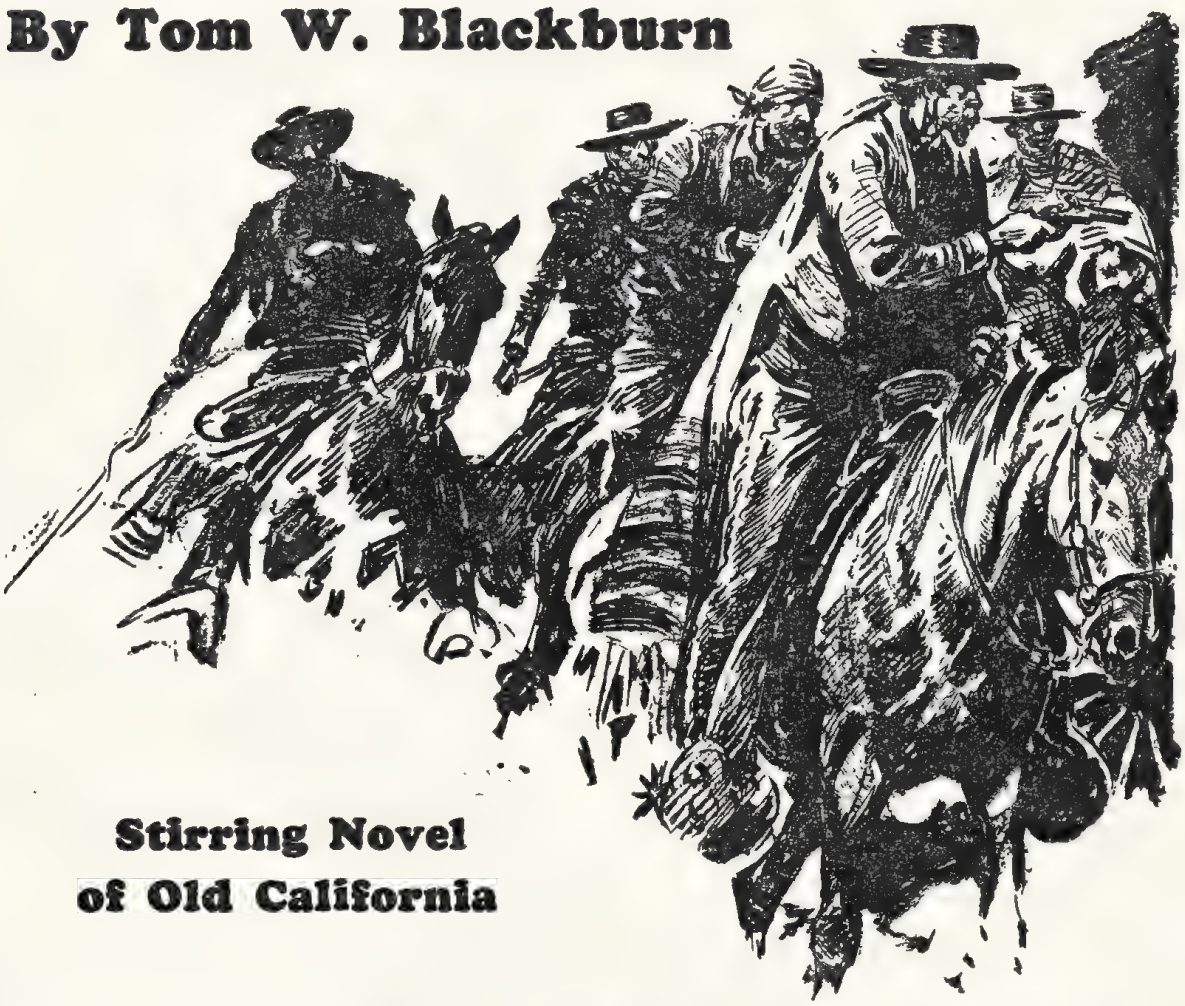
"You let him out?"

"That's right, Marie."

(Please turn to page 107)

HEIR TO HELL'S HACIENDA

By Tom W. Blackburn



Stirring Novel of Old California

To Clint Farrand, fleeing for his life, that swift-rolling closed carriage seemed like a gift from the gods, but that same slim, soft hand that reached out to aid him then would soon sign his death-warrant in the sinister, high-walled Hacienda of Dume!

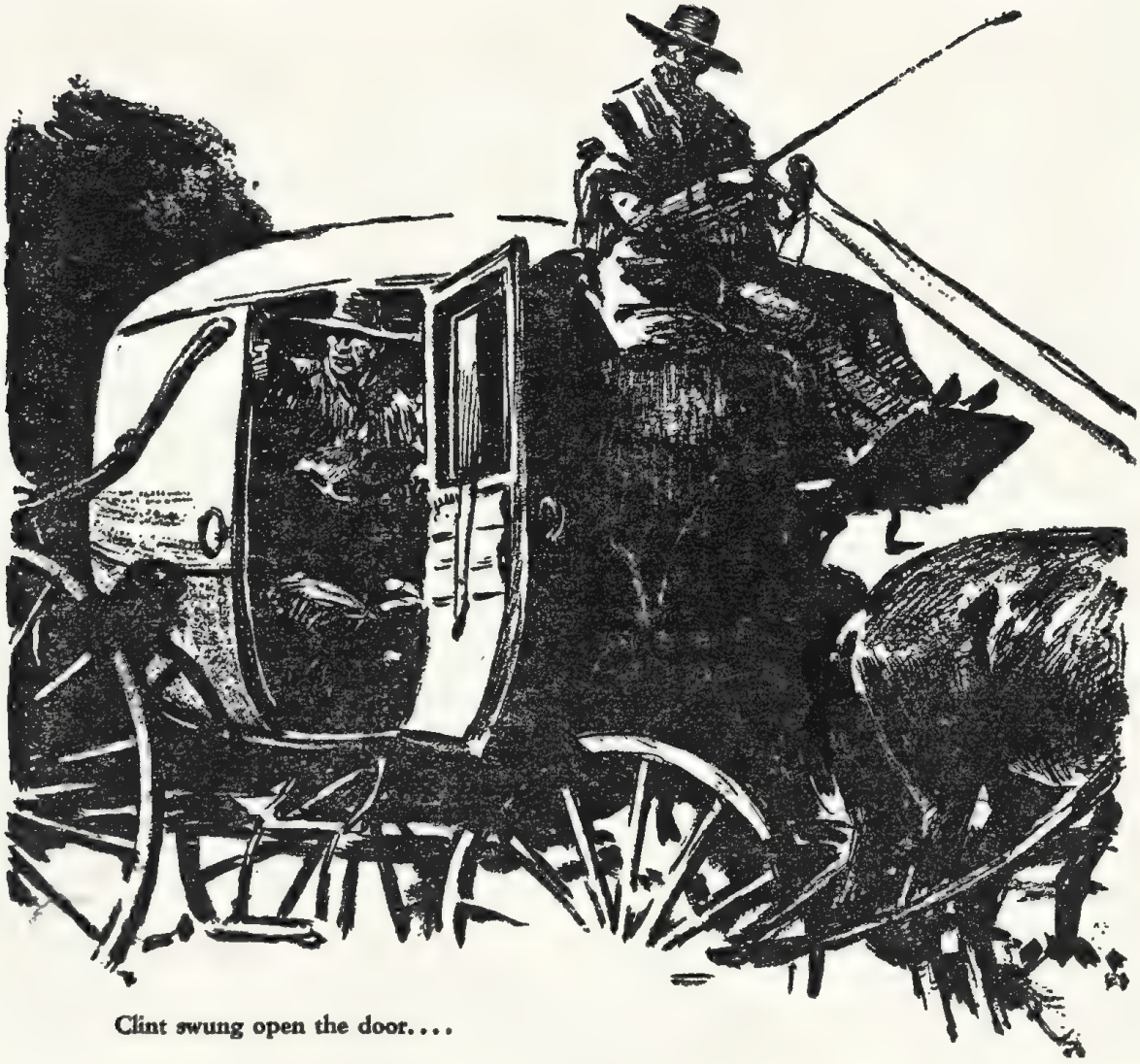
CHAPTER ONE

Alana Salazar

CLINT FARAND did not immediately go over the side of the *Boston Belle* when the captain ushered him out of his cabin. Clint was angry. And he was stubborn. Hearing this Yankee ship had dropped anchor at San Pedro, he had begged a ride on a trader's wagon thirty miles down from the little mud town of Los Angeles. And for one purpose.

There wasn't a keg of honest Yankee powder or a square of good tobacco in all Alta California. This ship was loaded with plenty of both, but its master was holding his prices so high a man couldn't afford the meagre store a buckskin man needed for his trail pack. Clint was ready to quit this country. Things went too slowly here for him, but be damned if he'd go without powder for his guns and tobacco for comfort along the bitter trail back to the Divide country, beyond the Colorado.

A sailor went forward from the captain's cabin and came back in a moment with another man who had apparently been in the hold looking at the cargo. In shadow, neither of them saw Clint. But he had a glimpse of the man from the hold. He was no mountain man, but he was a Yankee; tall, dressed in vainly elegant frocked coat, and wearing a low strapped gun.



Clint swung open the door....

Clint had a hunch. Maybe this gent had an in with the captain. Maybe he was one of the slick-eared traders already settling themselves along the coast below the Sierra. If so, Clint reckoned he might deal easier with a countryman than with the skipper of this Boston hooker. At least, he was a landsman and he'd know a trapper had to have powder and tobacco before he started back for his home hills.

The captain had acted funny, as if Clint's showing up on the dock had crossed some plans. One of the ship's hands came along the deck, saw Clint's shadow, and shifted toward him.

"You one of Talon's men?" the man asked.

Clint shook his head.

"Overboard with you, then!" the sailor barked.

Clint shook his head again. "I'm waiting for a gent—" he said.

The man paused uncertainly for a moment, then shrugged. "You're not so smart, matey," he said. "If Talon don't know you, it's an even bet you'll wish he did! Him and the skipper don't like strangers on deck when they're settin' together. And I hear Talon's got business ashore tonight. He'll be in a hurry and short on temper. You better shove off—"

The sailor grinned mockingly and went on up the deck about his business. A moment later, the door of the captain's cabin opened. The man in the frocked coat came out. He turned to speak to the captain.

"You watch your bookkeeping, Brady!" he growled in a low voice. "This is running to big figures. I'd hate to find you cheating on your end of it! And watch your men and how you handle your ship while you're in port. Sell off enough stuff to make it look good.

The captain answered from just within the cabin. "I wouldn't worry about me or my crew, Talon. Sailing men get cautious. We ain't apt to risk putting as sweet a deal as this on the rocks for a chance at a few extra quid. Cover your own tracks. I'll take care of the *Belle*."

The man in the frocked coat shrugged. There was some kind of stir among the sheds back of the wharf. Clint had a glimpse of a small, closed carriage running swiftly toward the waterfront.

"Damn an impatient woman!" the tall man spat. "She's ten minutes early. I've got to run for it. I'll see you, Brady. The moon is dark the thirty-first!"

The captain nodded and closed his door. The man in the frocked coat started on across the deck, and Clint shoved out from the shadows where he had been idling. He overtook the hurrying man and touched his arm.

"Got a minute, Talon?" he asked pleasantly.

★

TALON wheeled. His eyes probed into Clint's face, appeared to find nothing familiar, and his long body crouched. Clint was too close to reach for his own gun, but the tall man's weapon was free and swinging up.

Instinct grows strong in a man accustomed to the open and loneliness. Clint's arm fired like a charge of powder, his knuckles smashing into the tall man's face. The drawn gun went skidding across the deck into a scupper. The door of the captain's cabin jerked open and the captain bellowed for his crew.

Astonished, Clint realized only one thing. The deck of the *Boston Belle* would shortly be unhealthy. He took three long, reaching strides and vaulted over the rail. Behind him the deck of the ship thundered with running feet. As he hit the planking of the dock and caught his balance, guns snapped above and angry lead flung up splinters about him. More of the ship's crew were running for the gangway to cut him off from the settlement of San Pedro, back of the waterfront.

Clint had to have cover and he had to have it fast. This Yankee, Talon, was no man to punch in the face. That much was obvious. Who he was and why he would draw a gun on a stranger who but touched his arm was something else. Something which could wait for answering until lead had ceased to fly.

Clint avoided the warehouse on the dock, knowing it would prove more of a trap than a shelter, and sprinted recklessly into a wide, dark square of open ground. For a moment he thought he could cross this moonless open to the scattered buildings beyond before he was cut off. But he saw he could not, and he looked desperately about for a place to make a stand.

At this moment, with the clatter of hard driven horses, the little carriage he had earlier seen from the deck of the ship raced into the square and swung in beside him, its door wide. A soft voice urged frantically.

"In—quickly Paco will dodge them for us!"

Clint, astonished, seized a hand rail and hauled himself into the carriage. The woman leaned across, pulled the door closed, and straightened. The curtains were drawn, making the interior even blacker than the square outside. The carriage rocked dangerously again, scraped iron tires protestingly on worn paving, and plummeted down a smooth roadway. Clint's companion found one of his hands in the darkness and squeezed tightly.

"What is it, Eduardo?" she asked. "What is wrong at the ship? Is it a mutiny? I thought you would be killed when you leaped from the rail or that you would die before I could reach you—on the night we were to be married! What is wrong?"

Then this was not neighborliness, this rescuing of a hard pressed stranger! This girl, whoever she was, thought the man she had rescued was someone else. And Clint knew for whom he had been mistaken. Running and in bad light, it would not be hard to mistake him for the man in the frocked coat on the *Boston Belle*—the man named Talon. The man had sworn at an impatient woman who was ten minutes too early, this at the same moment that Clint had first caught sight of this carriage. He sucked in a breath of air.

This Talon was going to be very fond of Clint Farand. A fist in the face—then escape in a carriage with the woman Talon expected to marry. Clint gently freed his hand from the girl's.

"Ma'am," he said, "I'm obliged to you—but I reckon you've made a mistake!"

"Mistake?" The girl stiffened. "You are not Eduardo? Who are you?"

"Farand, ma'am—Clint Farand. A stranger to town. . . ."

The girl bounced forward, pounding with small fists in the dark against the roof of the carriage. A little trap opened in the roof. Clint saw a round head silhouetted in the opening.

"Paco, stop!" the girl cried. "Quick. We have made a mistake. We must go back!"

The driver did not slacken the run of his team.

"No, Señorita," he said. "I do not think we go back. There are horses behind us. I think the old señor has missed you at the rancho. I think these are the vaqueros from Sequit Mountain. I think the old one is with them. And he is angry. We do not stop!"

"Father?" the girl cried out. "He mustn't know! Drive, Paco!"

The driver grunted assent. The little trap closed. The carriage raced on. The girl rocked back and forth in her corner of the seat. Suddenly she caught at Clint's hand again.

"You are a Yankee. You were in trouble.

I saved you from it. You owe me something!"

"You saved my bacon, ma'am," Clint agreed. "I'll help you if I can."

"If you can? You must! I love another Yankee called Edward Talon. I was to meet him at San Pedro tonight. We were driving to San Gabriel where an old padre would marry us. And from there we would have gone to Eduardo's rancho behind Point Dume. Father would not have found me there. But he must have suspected me. If he learns I was running away with Eduardo he will see that we never meet again. You must tell him I ran away with you, Clint Farand! That is not too much to pay for escaping the guns at that ship!"

"All right," Clint agreed quietly. "He's your father. If you want to crawl instead of bucking up to him, that's your business. But you'd better get ready to face him. Horses are coming up fast behind us. I can hear them!"

The girl muttered softly. "Stand up to Guido Salazar? Clint Farand, now I really dressed in the California fashion Clint of a grandee. He carried an ancient flint-lock percussion pistol, and his eyes flickered.

"Por Dios! I'll end up hating Yankees, yet!" the old man raged. "Trying to make a fool of my daughter! You think a Salazar is so easily married as this? I have heard you called a rancher, Eduardo Talon. I have heard you have a place in the hills back of Point Dume. It is a lie. Cattle do not like those black hills. Rancher—*fagh!"*

The old man was in a dancing frenzy. Clint wondered what these people would expect of a man caught in the act of eloping with one of their women. He matched the other's anger, twisting his face savagely.

"You'll pay for this, Salazar!" he snarled. "You think you own this country. But I have friends here!"

"Friends! Swine, better! I—"

Salazar choked off as a *vaquero* spoke. *"Patrón,* look at the face. This is not the Yankee, Talon!"

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know you are a stranger to these valleys. No man can remember when even the governor said anything the master of Sequit Mountain did not want to hear!"

Clint shrugged. The drumming of horses hoofs beat up on either side of the carriage. Harsh voices challenged Paco, up on the box. And the driver slowed the carriage.

"If I'm running away with a woman, I ought to know her name," Clint said.

"Alana—Alana Salazar de Sequit!"

★

THE little carriage jolted to a stop. There was a scuffle and Clint swung open the door.

Half a dozen pairs of hands seized him. He made a great show of struggling fiercely, knowing well that actual resistance was futile and might be dangerous. He was dragged roughly out into the roadway and set down before a raging old lion of a haciendiero.

Guido Salazar was a good foot shorter than Clint but his size was no handicap. A strong, high-handed dominance was chiselled into every haughty line of his face, and his old body was as stiff as a good ramrod. He was

The old man's eyes sharpened. "The devil! This is so? Then who is the name of ninety saints are you?"

Clint clung to the part he had promised this man's daughter to play. "I am called Clint Farand," he said. And he made it sound as though the name was well known in the Californias. "It seems your daughter would marry me. She seemed a good match till I saw you. But now I don't know."

Clint's insolence was stinging and liquid.

"Sapristi!" the old man yelped in fresh anger. "We will see to that. A Salazar is only a good match, eh? Name of a curly haired dog! You try to fool me. You are not Eduardo Talon, it was he my daughter was to meet. This time she is safe, at least. But I want to know more of you. I do not like so many Yankees in these hills. Here, attend! Give this loose-tongued pup forty lashes for presuming to ride in the same carriage as a Salazar. Give him forty more as a lesson in respect for his elders. And bring him along to the mountain. We shall see if he was business on our side of the Sierra!"

The old man stepped past Clint into the carriage. The *vaqueros* closed in again. Clint swore under his breath. Eighty lashes! A

man who sees few women is willing to make some small gesture for one, when he is asked. But this. . . . His struggles were honest now, but the vaqueros held him tightly pinioned. Guido Salazar chuckled thinly from within the carriage, and Clint heard the girl speak to her father.

"You will be sorry if that Yankee is whipped, padre! The men in buckskin are short tempered!"

"If Yankees do not stop meddling with the affairs of Rancho Sequit, I shall lose my good humor also!" Salazar snapped. "You can't threaten me with Yankees!"

"And you cannot threaten me, padre. When I say I will marry a man, I will! Nothing will stop me."

The door of the carriage swung closed. Paco climbed sheepishly to the box, shook out his lines, and started the wheels turning. The coach rolled away through the night. The vaqueros left behind stripped Clint to the waist, laid him across a handy slab of stone, and set to. Then they proceeded to cut his back to ribbons with a nicety at the lash which inflicted the utmost of pain with the minimum of damage. Clint did not count all of the strokes. Once, much later, he stirred with a hot anger at the girl who had thrust him into this and the old man who had ordered a Yankee punished by the roadside. He was aware that he was tied limply unright in a moving saddle, and that the cool air of higher ground fanned his face.

★

BY DAWN the pain from his back had steadied to a pulsing torture through which he could think. He was cool enough then to realize that his pride was hurt more deeply than his hide. But this recognition did not lessen his anger that a mere desire to buy powder and smoking leaf had cost him this.

As light grew, it revealed a countryside as unreal as the memory of last night's events. Clint found he was still in the center of the stone-faced men who had manhandled him beside the road. He saw that they were a proud company, dressed in a splendor unusual even in this country where men were vain of their dress. They were taking him along the crest of a slanting ridge which raised toward a conical, dominant mountain, dead ahead. And on top of this peak, red-lighted by the rising sun, a great house sprawled in tiered magnificence.

Clint glanced back over his shoulder. Straw-colored California grass covered fold after descending fold of hills to the blue rim of the ocean and the smudge of San Pedro's little harbor at its fringe. Inland, across other hills dominated by the mountain ahead, was another smudge where lay Pueblo Los Angeles.

The whole of Alta California ringed this stronghold on the mountain. There could be no mistaking this splendor. It was Sequit Mountain, the home of the Salazars. The house and the mountain fitted old Guido. Clint wondered what the old man had planned for him here. Imprisonment for a time, certainly. What else could only be guessed.

In half an hour the vaqueros turned through a beautifully worked iron gate into a central courtyard of the great house. Clint had a brief view of an old man and a girl at coffee before a table on a tiled verandah. But he was led in an opposite direction through a pair of vaulted doorways. Moments later he was released in a small, clean room with a barred window.

He chafed at the raw places where his bonds had been tight and moved his shoulders gingerly against the stiffness of his back. This was a strange house, occupied by strange people. And Clint Farand was a fool. Maybe some of the old men of the mountains were right, that white-water trails were not good for young men. Look what had happened to himself. The first time a woman talked to him he jumped into a tangle without even looking —a woman whose face he had not even seen, at that!

Minutes after he was released, a serving man shuffling in, deferential even to the Yankee prisoner. He brought water and hot food. Clint was hungry. When he was finished, his empty dishes were cleared and two more servants came, lugging a steaming tub of water between them. One had a basket under his arm. These were set down wordlessly in the cell and the door refastened.

Clint stripped gratefully, thinking no greater luxury could be offered a battered and weary man than a tub of hot water. And he remembered that a man could do a first-class job of thinking in a tub. The basket contained oils and a balsam for his back. Under these was a clean soft linen shirt. There was also a length of rough towelling and a jar of *rancho* soap.

By sunset Clint felt steady on his feet again. Everything had reasoned out in his mind. He decided to make no point of his encounter with Ed Talon on board the *Boston Belle*. He had a little score to settle with old Salazar. A small matter of crowding the old man's pride down his throat with the truth about his daughter, and how it came Clint Farand was riding in her carriage. Let the girl settle with her father in her own way.

Yankees had better—and less painful ways —of spending their time in the Californias. After this, after he was away from this kingdom on a mountain top, he could buy Spanish

powder in Los Angeles, do without tobacco, and start back over the Sierra. And he could count himself lucky, at that.

There were links of a strange chain binding the captain of the *Boston Belle,* a frock-coated man with a too-quick gun, a girl, and an old man. A chain with snarls which might part at any link in violence. Clint Farand was certain of this, but a man kept skin to his back longer if he stayed out of matters which did not involve him. He had painful proof of this under his jacket.

If Guido Salazar thought he was next to God, let him deal with his own troubles!

CHAPTER TWO

Midnight Raiders Strike!

FARAND was fed again shortly after sunset. When the servant came back to clear away the dishes, Clint counted the doors closing and locking after the man. As nearly as he could judge, the door of his own cell and two of the vaulted gateways lay between himself and the main patio in front. They were solid obstacles, those doors. An unfamiliar patience settled over Farand. He waited for quiet in the lower section of the house, then took a small steel tool from his hair, a tool which old veterans of mountain trails had taught him to carry.

It was fashioned cleverly from the hammer spring of a big rifle, curved so that it fitted the curvature of his skull when thrust along the roots of his hair and hidden there. It was long enough and keen enough to use as a weapon at close range. But it had other, less violent, uses.

A lock pick was one. The door of the cell opened in thirty minutes. Somewhat after midnight—time was difficult to judge in the darkened passages—the last portal gave and opened.

Clint came through it eagerly. There had been no sound in this section of the house for more than an hour. The big patio seemed deserted. Clint started quietly across it, striking on a hunch for the stables. But with his third stride a calm voice reached out from the shadows of a wall.

"If I did not hate Yankees, I could admire them," Guido Salazar said smoothly. "That was a good piece of work, Clint Farand—three locks in less than two hours!"

Clint wheeled toward the sound of the voice. The old man leaned out from the wall against which he had been waiting, a huge pistol gripped in one hand. Clint was jolted by surprise, but the patience which had been his while he fought with the locks was gone. His body tightened up and his eyes measured distances and chances.

Salazar appeared to sense this tautness and jerked his gun warningly. "Don't be hasty, Farand," he warned. "Listen to me, first!"

Clint's eyes slitted. "Another ten-*centavo* lecture on the mighty Salazars?" he bit out.

The old man shook his head.

"Alana spoke the truth when she said you men of leather are short-tempered. But, *pues,* perhaps you have just cause. Follow me."

Salazar opened a door and backed through it. Clint followed him. The old man shut the door and touched a lamp to flame.

"Your back feels, better, señor?" he asked earnestly. Clint's brows went up in surprise. When an old lion purrs, there is something afoot. Salazar smiled with apology.

"I regret the lashing, but it was necessary. Alana must suspect nothing. I tell to you, a man may not have a heavier burden than a headstrong daughter! Song of the Saints! Alana is the comfort of my old age, but truly she has the touch for trouble which was the curse of my own youth. This Ed Talon, for instance: A blackleg; a scoundrel! What does he do at this place he claims is a rancho, behind Point Dume? It is guarded. A man cannot find out. Thrice I have sent my vaqueros to see and they have not come back. Perhaps he robs me of cattle. I do not know. I have need of a good man's help."

"Meaning me?" Farand grunted. "What the hell do I know about cattle and gents who steal them?"

"Cattle?" old Guido squeaked. "*Todos Los Santos,* no! Would I, Guido Salazar, the greatest cattleman the Californias have ever known, turn to a leather Yankee for help with my herds? What do I care for cattle? It has been ten years since I have been able even to count the thousands of hides which range my grass! If a thief steals a few he stings my pride but does not disturb the peace of my declining years. It is my daughter of which I think!

"She is not to marry this Eduardo Talon, not even if it costs me my fortune and my pride! If she must have a Yankee, then let her have an honest one!"

The old man stopped and watched Clint out of bright, measuring eyes. Clint was stunned. The old man's proposition was so clear he was certain he must have mistaken it. "You—you want me to—marry your daughter?"

Guido grinned wickedly. "I did not say that. But if Alana were to think you wished to do so. . . . I warn you Farand, it will not be easy. She will not trap like a mink. She has a mind of her own. And she is stubborn. But I promise you that if you turned her mind from this Talon, you'll be the richest Yankee who ever wore leather into the Californias!"

Clint slowly shook his head.

Salazar's confident grin did not change. "You but rode with Alana in a dark carriage. You have not seen her. It is possible you will change your mind, señor—"

"I don't want to see her!" Clint snapped. "I'm on my way out of here—out of California—"

The old man shrugged. "If that is the last word, I will say no more. I think you are a man who could do the thing I ask. But you have been ill-treated. No man rides from this house with a debt unpaid. Go to the small gate at the rear of the patio. It leads to the stables. A horse is ordered waiting for you. A good horse. It is yours."

Guido nodded toward the door. Clint crossed, opened the portal, and stepped outside. The old man snuffed the lamp and started after him. At this instant a shrill yell sounded. A gun crashed. The wide front gate crashed inward. Riders poured into the patio. House servants ran protestingly toward the intruders.

The riders flung from saddles; clubbed guns stroked, and servants went down. Clint had a glimpse of a lean figure in a tightly fitting coat at the point of the wedged attackers.

Guido snarled the man's name. "Talon! *Madre de Dios!* He's after Alana!"

The old master of Sequit started forward. Clint caught him, tore his swinging gun from his grasp, and clamped a hand across Guido's lips.

"Quiet!" he hissed. "There's thirty or forty of them. They'd gun you down like a dog! Easy. We can't do anything—now."

Salazar slackened. Clint freed him, and the old man swore softly.

"Ai! Butchers! Look—my *pobres* clubbed like rabbits!"

The raiders cut through the thin defenses in front of the house. Ed Talon and two others plunged in through the main door. They were back in seconds, carrying a kicking girl among them. Clint was watching closely. This was no elopement. Whatever she once had wanted of Talon, Alana Salazar did not want to go with the man like this.

From beginning to end it took less than ten minutes. Talon was a good engineer. Old Guido, gray-faced and shaken with anger and grief, caught Clint's arm savagely. "That is a good horse I ordered given you, Señor Farand. As you love God, ride it to death on the way to Los Angeles! I must have the *policia* at once!"

A fine help they'd be—the sleepy provincial police dozing within the mud walls of Los Angeles! Farand grunted. If Salazar's faith was in the police alone, he'd likely never see his daughter again. The decision came without conscious thought. There was a vague realization that Guido Salazar was already in his debt and that he had never seen the face of the kidnaped girl. But something drove Clint ahead.

Few Yankees of the cut of this Talon thought enough of any woman to make such a raid as this to get her. There were women much easier to get than one whose father kept her in a citadel like Sequit Mountain. Clint did not believe that Ed Talon wanted Alana Salazar for herself alone. More likely his eyes were on a chest of gold Spanish *reales* for ransom.

He turned slowly to the old man. "I'm not riding through Los Angeles."

"But, señor!" Guido protested frantically, "the distance to the Sierra passes is shortest that way. Surely you will do this much for me!"

"Sometimes the long way around gets a man where he's going faster than any other," Clint answered. "How do I get to Point Dume from here?"

★

TOWARD the end of an hour, Clint pulled up. The sound of a horse behind him came clearly. He scowled. Old Guido had given him clear directions. There was no need for a guide. The approaching rider came swiftly, saw Clint, and reined in. Clint recognized Alana Salazar's coachman, Paco.

"Por Dios, señor!" the man panted. "You ride fast on a strange trail. I thought never to overtake you!"

"The old man sent you?" Clint pressed. "Something else wrong?"

"The *patrón? Pues,* I do not come from the *patrón.* No! I am asleep at the stables when this terrible thing happened. I knew nothing till it was over and you were gone. . . . The poor señorita, she has brought this about. But who can blame her? Guido Salazar is a wise man in many things. But not in the raising of a daughter! How much evil happens to a woman because she is lonely and her mind kept in idleness! Guido would make a princess in a tower of Alana—when she loves the smiles of many faces about her—music, friends, and the attentions of men! It was the old man's folly and he is now richly repaid."

"You know this Ed Talon?"

Paco shook his head, his eyes clouding. "Observe I said I did not blame the señorita. Talon is a bold man with a smooth tongue. He contrived to meet her often when she rode on the ranch. He made great boasts of wealth and fine high living. The señorita's loneliness made her blind. I said I do not blame her, but I would call her a fool if she was my own sister. A man who courts a woman in secret is not worthy of her!"

Farand scowled. "You think the old man's a fool. You think the girl's a fool. Why did you ride after me, then?"

"Quien sabe?" Paco answered with a wry shrug. "Perhaps it is because I am also a fool! But I heard you rode for Rancho Dume alone and I had a curiosity to see what would happen when a buckskin man came to that place. Beside, señor, only a man who knows these upper hills like the skin of his hand could find a way past Eduardo Talon's guards. Paco is such a man!"

CHAPTER THREE

Death at Rancho Dume

PACO signaled a halt near dawn. For half an hour their way had been up through a narrow, slanting canyon. The vaquero pointed to a slot gaping in the skyline ahead.

"There are only two good approaches to Point Dume," he said. "Through that gap and by the sea. I have been here hunting. I know a third way. We leave our horses in a box draw to the left where they will be hidden. And we pray for sure feet and good luck!"

Paco was not exaggerating the need for sure feet. They left their horses hobbled on good grass in the little box draw and started up a sheer uplifting of craggy granite. The rock was rotten and the footing treacherous. They made a thousand feet of climb in little better than a half hour, racing the coming light.

When the sun lifted over the hills back of Pueblo Los Angeles, they were on the summit of an enormous hogback, running like a barrier out into the sea. At its terminal was a conical upthrust which was visible from the water along a hundred miles of coastline. Paco, panting and drenched with sweat, pointed.

"Point Dume!" he breathed.

Clint was not looking at the tongue of land and the peak on its point. Much closer at hand, scarcely a pair of miles away, was a cluster of mud and pole shacks. A clearly defined trail wound down from them to a stretch of beach behind the shelter of the point. Back of them, even closer at hand, was a huge brush corral. It was black with the backs of restless cattle. A scattering of large fires burned to one side of the corral, rolling up a towering pall of smoke.

The smell of that smoke was thick and sickening. Clint could not place the odor for a moment. Then he recalled a flash brush fire in a New Mexico canyon a season before which had trapped and incinerated a score of deer. This smell had been heavy in that canyon, also.

Clint realized he was looking down on a huge abattoir, a slaughterhouse such as few men had ever seen. His curiosity about Ed Talon and his trade was satisfied. Here on the mesa-like crest of this remote headland was a cattle-stealing enterprise of astounding size. Guido Salazar was not losing a *few* cattle—he was losing them by the thousands! They were being driven here from Sequit range, slaughtered, and skinned. The smoking fires were kept constantly burning to dispose of the worthless carcasses after the skins were removed.

Something like admiration touched Farand. There was an epic note to a plan of such size. He had a flash of sympathy for Alana Salazar. The man who had hatched this bold scheme could make a fool out of most women, but the admiration and sympathy swiftly died.

Damn a country where a rancher did not trouble to keep a tally on his herds! A businesslike inventory of Sequit herds would have weeks ago exposed Talon's drain on them. And Guido could have moved against his enemy before Talon held Alana as hostage. But the old man blandly thought Talon was only an unwanted suitor—that no mere Yankee could actually steal his daughter, let alone threaten his huge empire.

Yet Alana was gone, and if Talon had many more days in which he could work, Rancho Sequit would be stripped and bankrupt. There would be no hides left for Guido, himself to ship. They would all be baled safely in the hold of the *Boston Belle*. Ruin might be facing Alana—Talon might be planning to use her for more than merely a hostage against possible discovery and attack. Clint didn't know. But he could see the ruin facing old Guido. It was here, below him.

And there was more to it than just that. Rancho Sequit was an enterprise of which all *californios* were proud. Ed Talon was a Yankee. There were more Yankees crossing the Sierra, a great tide of them. The actions of those already here—men like Talon, like Farand, himself—would determine whether there would be war or peace between the two races soon to blend on the shores of the Pacific.

If a man was tempted to let Alana Salazar and her father boil in their own oil, he had to remember that the tide filtering westward needed friends and not enemies.

Clint sucked in his breath. This wasn't something which had been forced onto him. He had bitten off this chunk, but he couldn't chew it alone. He turned to Paco, standing half stunned with what he saw.

"We've got to have help!" he said. Paco's eyes rolled.

"In truth!" he agreed. "All of the vaqueros, and an army beside. But look at the guards the dogs have posted. It means hard fighting. And when the fighting begins, what will happen to the señorita?"

Clint smiled grimly. "Nothing—if I have luck," he said. "I'm staying. You get back to the mountain and tell old Guido to bring every man he can reach. Bring them in the way you brought me. You should be back within an hour or two after sunset. But don't let Guido attack until there's some sign in the camp. A fire or some kind of a stir. I'll try to get Alana to a safe place and kick up some kind of a ruckus to cover the attack!"

Paco shook his head.

"Not even a leather man can do this, señor!" he protested. "I am a fool to believe you. But I do. You will be a dead man before you reach that camp of the devil. I know this, and still I believe you. Did I not say I was perhaps also a fool!"

Paco made a quick gesture of a cross from shoulder-tip to shoulder-tip. *"Vaya con Dios!"* he murmured. "God be with you!" Then he turned and trotted swiftly back the way they had come.

Farand watched him out of sight, then started on down the sloping crest of the big headland. At the end of a quarter of a mile he was seen, and riders coursed swiftly out to meet him. They came up behind drawn guns, disarmed him, and prodded him on down into the camp.

Ed Talon was waiting by a still blazing breakfast fire. He looked Clint over with a masked face. Clint measured the man, adding to the picture snatched aboard the *Boston Belle*.

Talon was cut from hard flint. He was quick and sure, a dangerous man. The nervousness which had made him jerk his gun at a touch aboard the ship was lacking here in his own camp.

"I've seen you before. . . ." he said slowly.

Clint nodded. "At San Pedro. I followed you aboard a hooker on the prowl for a job and got iron shoved into my belly for an answer!"

Talon's eyes narrowed in recollection. His hand went to a bruise on his jaw, and anger flickered in the muscles of his face. "And you escaped in a woman's carriage—you blundering fool!"

Clint shrugged in innocent protest. "How the hell did I know there was a girl in that hack? And what's it to you? Her old man overtook us and his crew paid me off before they turned me loose on the road. Look at this!"

Farand pulled up his shirt, exposing the stripes layed on by Guido's men. Talon's face eased.

"You didn't get onto the Salazar rancho?"

"I'm not crazy! I had enough Salazar right there. A trader came along the road and told me a Yankee had a ranch up this way where I might sign on till I'd gotten a trail-stake big enough to get me out of this damned country. If I'd have known it was yours and what kind of a ranch it was, I'd have passed it up. But it's too far to walk back, now!"

"You walked?"

Clint nodded. Walking up from San Pedro would cover the time he had spent at Sequit Mountain. Talon looked keenly at him, then spat.

"You're a first-class tracker," he said softly. "Point Dume is a hard spot for a stranger to reach. But you're a hell of a liar! Look at your boots—soft Indian leather. Two hours on these shale trails along the coast would have them in ribbons!"

Clint swore softly. A trail man, he should have thought of that. Talon was sharp.

"The corrals are full," Talon went on. "I've got to get them emptied today. There's more hides coming in on the hoof. But I'll have enough time tonight for you—and my other prisoner. If old Salazar sent you up here I'll send you right back—in a basket! I'll want to hear you talk. Put him in the empty side of the crib, boys. Maybe he can stop that wench's blubbering!"

Clint was dragged roughly across to a little building with two doors and no windows. It had obviously been a storehouse, partitioned down the middle. One door was barred across the outside, the other was open. He was thrust through this and locked in. His jailers moved away, and in the sudden silence he heard muffled sobbing beyond the partition.

He rapped softly on the barrier. The sobbing ceased. A voice spoke cautiously. *"Quien es?* Who is it?"

"Clint Farand."

"The Yankee!" Alana Salazar's voice turned reckless and eager. "Listen, Yankee—you must escape at once! Ride to Sequit Mountain. Tell my father that he can still save the rancho. He must come. And he must not count me. Tell him that—that I am already dead—that the rancho is all he has left!"

It was a strong and urgent plea, and it was without heroics. Farand had heard strong men when they were brave. But none had been as brave as this girl who was in terror for her life.

"Your father will come," he said quietly. "The rancho will be safe—and so will you, if we can keep you away from Talon long enough. Keep making a little noise. Pretend not to know who I am. I'll do what I can—"

Clint stepped back from the partition, made a circuit of the outer 'dobe walls, and raised his hand to the poled ceiling. Tonight was the thirty-first—the dark of the moon. Tonight the *Boston Belle* would be off the beach below for her cargo. And tonight Paco would be back with an attacking force.

In broad daylight he had to get Alana out of her cell and into a hiding place in which Talon could not find her. Without his hostage, the man would be on even odds with the crew from Sequit Mountain. The first step was freedom for himself. And the roof was his best bet.

His fingers found a roof-pole which did not feel too solid. He could only hope the mud plastered on top of it was not too thick when the time came. He raised his other hand to his hair and brought out the curved sliver of steel hidden there.

The little blade bit deeply and a chip fell from the *viga*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Like Trapped Rats!

THE morning dragged slowly. Clint's arms ached from working overhead with an inadequate tool. But he cut through the first ceiling pole and started on a second. He hoped two would be enough. Alana Salazar kept on with her sobbing and stirring about beyond the partition, effectively masking any small noise Clint made. The sounds of a charnel house drifted in from outside. Men shouting at driven cattle. The whistle of stroking axes. The grunts of falling animals. And the chatter of men stopping after every three or four hides to whet new edges onto their skinning knives. A new odor was added to the oppressive stench of the fires beyond the corral—the odor of fresh blood in the sun.

When he had cut through the second pole, Clint replaced his knife and swung his weight on the butt end of the cut. For a moment he thought the 'dobe plastered on top would hold it. Then the mud gave and the pole came down. Cracked 'dobe fell through. Light followed.

Clint seized the other *viga* and pulled it down, also, leaving a narrow slot open in the roof. It looked too narrow. But when he had pulled himself up to it, his head passed through and then his shoulders. Compressing his body, he twisted and squirmed on through the opening to stretch out flat in the sun on the roof.

He lay catching his breath for a moment and aware that only the low retaining wall around the edge of the roof hid him from the crew busy at their bloody work in this camp. Then he inched forward. The severed *vigas* had cracked the roof across the other half of the building. He worked swiftly, prying a hole there, also. When he judged it big enough, he lowered his head and torso into the room below. Alana Salazar sat on a box in the center of the room, sobbing obediently but with dry eyes. She looked up and Clint caught his breath. He understood now why Guido had hinted he would change his mind about courting this girl when he had seen her in good light.

Clint had thought all the girls of the Californias were beautiful. Any man freshly in from the long trek across the deserts was apt to think this. Alana Salazar had the olive and ivory complexion, the rich jet hair, the large eyes, and the graceful body of her sisters. But there was a compelling strength to her face and a levelness in her gaze which none of the others possessed.

She stood quickly up. "Thank God for you, Yankee Farand!" she said softly. "Now is time?"

Clint nodded and extended his hand downward. The girl caught it and he lifted her bodily upward through the opening he had made. She flattened on the roof beside him.

"You all right?" he whispered. The girl nodded, her eyes running nervously over the camp about them.

"Yes, but now—are we any better here than inside?"

"Not if we stay here. But we've got a chance. See that pile of hides?"

He pointed. The girl shivered. The hides had been freshly stripped but clumsily so. Bits of meat still clung to them. They had been awkwardly stacked so that a little tunnel ran under the mound.

"It's close to noon. We'll drop to the ground in back and make a run for it when the call to grub comes. If we're lucky, we can make it without being seen. And when they miss us, they won't look that close to this shack. It's our best chance."

Alana nodded. They lay in silence. After an interminable wait, somebody began beating on an iron tub. The crew at the corrals and the killing ground straightened above individual tasks and started for the center of the camp. Clint watched hawkishly for an instant in which all backs were turned away from the building and when it came, he nudged the girl. She had been watching also. They went over the retaining wall together, swung by their hands from its lip, and dropped to the coarse turf covering the ground below. Clint was grateful for that turf. It would show no tracks.

Doubled close to the ground, with Alana right behind him, he dove for the pile of green hides. Alana shot past him when they reached them and burrowed into the little tunnel under the heap. Clint wormed in after her.

It was an uncomfortable place. Clint could feel the girl flinch at the blood and the wet smell of the hides, but she made no complaint. The crew finished eating and came back to work. Presently more hides were being heaped onto the pile under which they were stretched.

And then somebody discovered the prisoners had escaped from the storehouse. The camp was in an uproar for half an hour.

Clint was wedged far enough under the hides, in order not to be seen, that he could himself see little of what happened. Searchers came close to the heap of hides twice, but his hunch had been good. They did not think of looking under that unlovely pile.

Satisfaction eased him. The search would spread, but they would be safe. "It's a long time till dark," he said to the girl behind him. "Can you wait here that long?"

"Pues, si!" the girl answered with wry humor. "Of course! Where else could I go? What happens at dark?"

"There will be no moon tonight. Talon's ship-captain friend will bring the *Boston Belle* in off the beach. That's why the hurried slaughtering today—to fill out her cargo. They'll aim to load her. If Paco gets back with your father—and that should be shortly after dark—Talon may decide he's cleaned up enough here. Without you as a hostage to hold against your father to keep him from attacking, Talon may decide to clear out with his crew on the ship. We've got to stop that. And we've got to make a diversion to help the vaqueros from Sequit Mountain get in past Talon's guards."

The girl whistled softly. "And we are to do these things from under this heap of hides?" she said. "I should like to see something you thought *couldn't* be done, sometime, Yankee!"

Clint chuckled at her dry humor and they were silent after this.

★

FARAND had learned there was no twilight along this coastline. Day lasted only so long as the sun hung above the water. When it went below the horizon, night came swiftly. He was alarmed at sunset when Talon's crew began stripping hides from the heap over Alana and himself for baling. But swift darkness brought the supper call in the camp and interrupted the work.

Clint grunted at his companion, stretched stiffened muscles, and crawled out of the miserable shelter. Crouching close to the ground to avoid silhouette, he worked around the edge of the huge corral farthest from the supper fires and so reached the shadowed, brushy slopes beyond the camp.

The girl came up beside him and he pointed to the beach below. Riding beyond the strip of sand were the lights of a ship.

"That was to have taken me on my honeymoon!" Alana said in a shaken voice. Reaching into her blouse she brought out a short cord plaited from torn strips of cloth. "I planned to hang myself at sunset," she went on, tossing the cord away. "This is twice you have come just in time, Clint Farand—to my carriage in the darkness at San Pedro, and again here. I'll stay close to you, now. The third time I might not be so lucky!"

Clint nodded and started moving again. When the crew in the slaughter camp trooped back from its meal, they were crouched in brush along the beach scant yards from the makeshift, rickety pier.

Clint saw the ship's captain on the pier. A few minutes later Ed Talon came striding down from the camp and called to the seaman. They huddled close to the brush sheltering Clint and Alana. The nervousness Talon had displayed on board the ship at San Pedro was back again.

"Damn it, Brady," Talon rasped, "this trapper isn't any thick-skulled native! He took that girl right under our noses. And that means trouble. So long as I had the girl, I could force old Salazar into calling off any dogs that was yapping at our heels till we'd stripped off every hide on his ranch. I'd like it as well as you if you could haul a cargo to Mazatlan, store it, and come back for another. But I don't want to be pinned ashore, waiting for you to come back!"

Captain Brady grunted. "You're supposed to be the bucko in this outfit. Another cargo of hides would be ten thousand dollars apiece for us!"

"I know that. But it also might be my neck. This winds us up. And unless you get some of your crew aboard to help bale the stuff we've stripped the last day or two, we'll have to leave plenty of leather lying on the ground up there when we pull out. I smell trouble, and I've got a hunch it's on top of us, now!"

Brady spat. "All right, Talon!" he agreed. "I'll order the lads ashore. But I'll charge you loading time for every hour they work. It goes on my split. I told you to leave that girl alone. A woman messes up any business. This is your bull. You pay for it!"

Talon growled. The captain went back out the pier. Talon started up toward the camp. Minutes later Brady came back from the ship with most of his crew trailing after him. They wound on up toward the fires. Clint figured time. Any minute now Paco and Guido should come boiling up on top of Point Dume. When they did, the *Boston Belle* must be in no shape to sail. If she was, Talon and Brady could load their crews and make sail with what hides they already had aboard. There would be no way to stop them.

Clint stood up. "I'm going onto the ship," he said.

Alana stood up, also. "Good luck, Clint Farand!" she said earnestly. "They might come back. I'll stand watch."

As he came up under the swell of the *Boston Belle's* sides, Clint felt relief. Her deck appeared deserted. The next instant he was locked in a tangle with a guard who had been crouching in the lee of the gangplank. Clint saw the man just soon enough to get one hand to the fellow's throat.

The seaman was a powerful man and he fought with that terror of throttled wind which can make a giant out of a clerk. Clint was flung against the side of the ship with a jolt which pounded his own wind from him. But he clung mercilessly to his hold. The sailor smashed a horny fist into his face, splitting the skin over his cheekbone.

Clawed fingers raked cruelly across Clint's face, searching for an eye to gouge. Clint twisted, caught the man's weight against his hip, and doubled abruptly. The sailor's feet swung up and he catapulted against a rail-timber on the gang-plank. Bone splintered and the man rolled limply off of the narrow pier into the water.

His body sank slowly and Clint watched bubbles trail up after it. He steadied himself and swung aboard the ship. A light showed in a companionway. He dropped down this to the between-decks. At the far end the door of a storeroom was open and Clint saw an aproned man at work over a broached case of goods. The cook, he thought.

Moving swiftly, he dodged and raced along the passage toward the stern where there was a small door with red lettering across it. When he reached the door, he glanced back.

The red lettering identified it as the powder room. It was closed with a big lock.

Clint was scowling at it, thinking rapidly that the cook would probably turn and discover him before he had a chance to pick that lock with his hair-knife, when the distant rattle of gunfire filtered into the between-decks. The cook heard the sound and turned.

Clint flattened against the side of the passage, but the man saw him. He came out of the store-room and started down the passage, gripping a huge cleaver he had used to open the packing-case.

Farand felt his muscles tighten. The cook's right arm was swinging as he moved. Suddenly the sweep turned to blinding speed. The cleaver shot away from the man's hand and hurtled down the passageway. It was a deadly cast, made with sure skill, and Clint didn't have time to drop.

He could only flatten himself a little tighter against the wall. The cleaver came past him, slitting his jacket and slicing a painful gash deep into the muscles of his chest in passing. The cleaver buried itself in the door of the powder room.

The cook swore savagely and bounded on forward, palming a thin, shortened slicing-knife from his belt. Clint's hand closed over the cleaver and tore it from the planking. The broad knife had surprising balance and a great weight. He wheeled and swung with it. The cook bellowed and choked off. Farand had never used such a weapon against a man before and the work it did made him sick. He stepped over the half-severed body of the ship's cook and chopped at the lock on the door in front of him. It gave and dropped open.

He wedged into the room beyond. A broached keg of powder was close at hand. He dumped half of it on the floor, close to other barrels, chopped a gap in the staves of one of these, and then went back out the door with the broached keg under his arm. He kept it tilted, spilling a trail of black grains.

As he started up the companionway he was again aware of the noise from outside. He heard Alana calling his name frantically.

He shoved his head out the deck hatch and shouted once, hoping the girl could hear him above the racket. "Alana—get clear!"

He could see no movement in the brush where he had left the girl. Ed Talon and Brady and a motley crew of desperately running men thundered onto the pier. Talon saw Clint at the hatchway and flung a shot. Clint ducked back, dropped the keg of powder, and jerked a lantern swinging on a beam from its hook. He tore the flame shield from the light and dropped it into the head of the powder train.

Fire flashed up at him, singeing his face, and raced back down the passageway. He tried to dodge out the hatch again but was driven back by Talon and Brady and others already over the rail. He crouched, counting split seconds. When the first blast jolted the bottom of the *Boston Belle,* Talon was already in the head of the companionway, his gun level before him. The concussion shook the man's aim a little. Clint felt the slug burrow in high in his shoulder. Then all the powder went.

A GALE of wind rushed up the passageway, hit him a blow between the shoulders, and carried him along with it. He went past Talon like a piece of debris. His knee struck the man's face and pulped it in passing. He shot out the hatch and turned slowly over, high above the ship. The *Boston Belle* turned herself inside out in a red inferno below him. He saw a great fan of debris spread out about him, drifting as he was, slowly through the air.

Then the water was rushing up. And dazed senses finally shut off consciousness. Landing in the salty water scant yards from the shore was but a vague impression. So was the wild, reckless crew which set a torch to every build-

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ing in Ed Talon's camp and shot down running survivors like rabbits in a warren.

Farand fought his way weekly ashore. Hands reached for him, small, strong hands. They helped him upright and started him up the slope. He saw gaudily dressed vaqueros racing along the sand, salvaging bales of hides which had been thrown from the exploding ship.

The hands bothered him. They did not seem to belong to anyone, yet they were there when he staggered or missed a step. Guido Salazar came loping up and thrust a squat bottle to his lips without words. Clint sucked eagerly at the fire in it and his head began to clear. He stepped back, found the small hands again, and saw Alana at his side, staring up at him eagerly.

"Song of Seventy Saints!" old Guido exulted. "Who would think it? *Pues,* our slaughtering and skinning is done for the season. We will not need to touch a hide save to ship it. How could I think I hated Yankees!"

Clint glanced uneasily at the place where the shattered ribs of the *Boston Belle* jutted above the water. Alana's grip tightened.

"Gone, Clint—all gone!" she whispered. "There's only one Yankee on Point Dume, now!"

Guido saw how close his daughter stood to Clint. He nodded. "Good! Good!" he said. "The girl shows sense, at least!"

But he was obviously distracted, his mind on something he thought more important.

Paco came up, and the old man dropped a hand to the *vaquero's* shoulders. "Paco—what a day!" he exulted anew. "Look, we do not have to slaughter this season. It has all been done for us. You will tell the *probres* we will have a long fiesta instead of butchering this season. *Por Dios,* what luck!"

Guido moved off with Paco, chuckling. Alana smiled at Clint, but there was trouble in her eyes. "Listen to him! Now it is done, you will be going back across the Sierra? Or will you stay and give him peace by marrying his daughter?"

Clint grinned.

"I don't know about the daughter," he said as though he weighed a difficult problem. "But my conscience won't let me leave an old fool who won't even count his cattle. Somebody will have to look after his rancho for him or he'll lose it sure, next time!"

The trouble deepened in Alana's eyes. Clint saw she did not understand his joke. He kissed her. And when he straightened, her eyes were clear. The trouble was gone as completely as it was gone from Rancho Sequit.

THE END

(Continued from page 93)

"You shouldn't have done that, Peter. He was the carcajou killer."

"Pierre Belette?" Peter scoffed. "He is my faithful trail companion, no more the Carcajou than you are. Will you come, Marie?"

"No," she said. "I shall stay until my father needs me no longer."

"*Adieu,* then." He pressed her fingers, found them cold. "I will return."

He ducked outside, heard her murmured: "Good-bye, Peter," as she dropped the bar behind him. For an instant, Peter hearkened to the buck and smash of gunfire down by the water gate, the yells of frenzied men, the crash and impact of warriors locked in man-to-man conflict. He drew a deep breath and broke into a run around the house.

As he ran, he snatched off his cap, pulled down an inner lining of muskrat, turning it up to hide any hint of the tawny weasel weather pelt. From inside, he shook out a carefully coiled cascade of coarse black Indian hair. Donning this headpiece, he darted to the factor's front door, let himself into the hall and blew out the candle.

Cullen Yost Flewellen came rushing through the secret portal from below, his face gorged with fury. Four strong-arm men read the answer in his face. The four were Carm Yaple, Glarney Geer, Rene Brigance—and Benham Bishop, whose sway at Vinegar Springs Post had been only little more humane than the Great Northern way.

"He's gone," said Bishop.

"Gone . . . yes!" roared Flewellen. "And who could have let him out except that sweet butter-won't-melt-in-her-mouth cousin of mine. Marie!" His voice thundered through the silent rooms and the eyes of the living dead man at his elbow burned like fire. "Marie, come here to me!"

As if in answer, the hall door opened and a gentle voice said: "Did you call?"

What they saw, poised just inside the threshold, turned their blood to ice. A misshapen creature standing on bowed legs, hunched of back, one shoulder sagging grotesquely, leering at them through a curtain of unkempt hair, voicing a devil's own chuckle at their husked: "*Carcajou!*"

"*Oui, M'sieu's, le Carcajou.*" The gnome's eyes were glittering, his hooked talons working, his nose wrinkling in the friendless way of the wolverine, after which he was called. "You call me, *M'sieu's.* For the long time you have call me."

Bishop whimpered in his throat. Gaunt Glarney Geer hid his emotions behind a killer mask, his hands curled over his pistols. Rene

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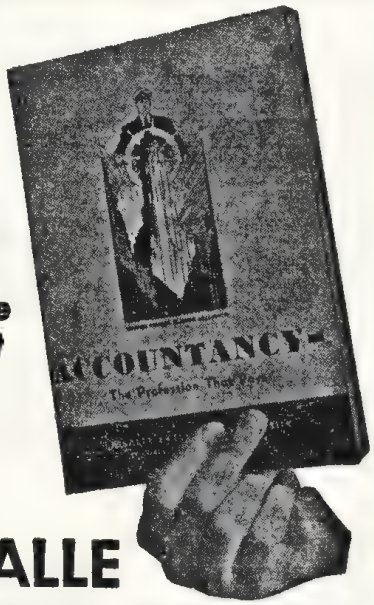

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Brigance, rotund breed, smiled a death smile. Carm Yaple, the albino killer, twitched nervously. Flewellen, well poised, reached into his bag of tricks for the medicine that seldom failed.

"Yes," he said. "I've sent out many a call for you, Carcajou. I can use you in my organization. You can use the money Great Northern's prepared to pay."

The Carcajou seemed not to hear. His glance burned them. "Brigance, recall Utah Jacks, at Tobacco River? You burned out his eyes to make him reveal his cache. His blood cries out for payment. And you, Geer, killed the Ketchum Brothers who had bragged of their luck of trapping six black fox. You didn't expect to pay for those pelts, did you, Geer?"

"Small stuff," scoffed Flewellen. "I will offer twice what anybody else—"

"Yaple, you took Great Northern money for robbing Quaker Post cubbies, murdering two trappers and violating caches. Flewellen, you assumed the place of your helpless uncle, browbeat your cousin and laid the ground for making this fur country your own."

"It will be mine," snapped Flewellen. "And yours if you'll listen to reason. Those who help me will share—"

"And you, Bishop," went on the Carcajou, doggedly, "gained the trust of the Independents and sold them out. Why should you live to spend your crooked gain?"

"Join my fighters, Carcajou." Desperation was creeping into Flewellen's tone. "You'll win more with us behind you than ever you can by playing lone wolf."

The Carcajou laughed. "A wolf never travels with the rabbit pack, M'sieu'."

Flewellen flushed, feeling for his gun. "What you expect us to do?" he demanded. "Crawl to you? Hell no. Your running a bluff, or is it fight you want?"

"Fight, you sniveling rabbits, fight!"

Carcajou's hands moved, blindingly. His bent form swayed from the portal as five pairs of merciless eyes betrayed their draws. Five pistols flamed. The Carcajou seemed blown back into the hall, and the renegades came roaring after him, led by Geer, Brigance and Yaple. From the floor, where his targets were silhouette blackly, the Carcajou's deadly twin-barreled pistols coughed their loads. Thunderous seconds, with men tumbling across the threshold. Four shots. Four moaning, writhing, bullet-stricken men!

OUT of that shambles rose Benham Bishop, to wheel and try for escape. A flung knife, sinking to the hilt in his back, dropped him. Untouched by this holocaust of

death, the Carcajou came to his feet, pouched his smoking pistols, caught another from the nerveless hand of Carm Yaple. A bullet chipped the jamb close to his head and he ducked back, but not before he had seen Cullen Yost Flewellen backing into the kitchen, his helpless uncle held before him as a shield.

A door flung open at the Carcajou's left and Marie stood there, a pistol in her hand, and her scream shrilled through the house: "Help! It's the Carcajou!"

And from outside the entrance, Pierre Belette's bawled answer: "Hoi, Ma'm'sle, Pierre ees come. Long tam Pierre hunt zat *cochon* w'at keel my woman and burn ze *cabane.*" He flung open the front door, plunged into the gloomy hall, his pistol held before him. "*Diable*, w'at ees zis?"

He fell silent, looking at wholesale death on the floor, at the girl who wept at the empty chair where the paralytic had sat. The room reeked with castor, from the small vial crushed on the floor. The Carcajou had come . . . and gone. Pierre was still standing there regarding the killer's work when Peter Bendamon stepped through the open front door, the limp body of Yost Flewellen in his arms.

Pierre gasped, looked into open eyes that had burned so fanatically only moments ago, eyes that were blank now. "*Le feu est mort,*" he murmured. "The fire is out."

Peter nodded, his eyes on the four dead men. Marie crossed the great living room to him, unasked questions in her eyes. Peter said: "I'm sorry, Marie. The man who stole your father's place here has just stolen his life. He was carrying your father to the little gate in the corner of the stockade. When I would have stopped him, he shot your father and now is outside, running . . . from what?"

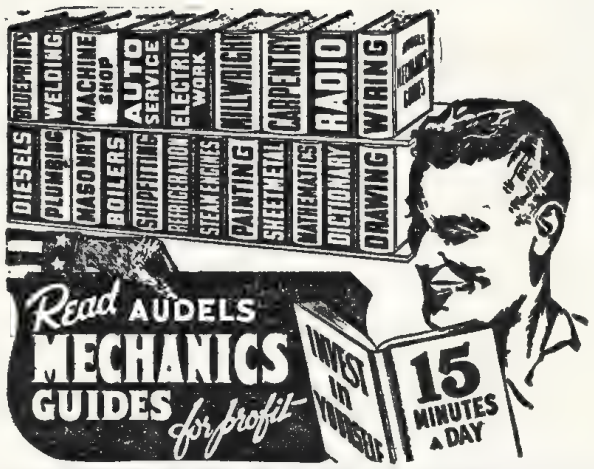
"What?" She pointed to the floor. "From the killer who did this. The Carcajou!" Emotion swept away her savagery and she cried as he carried the old factor to his chair. Gently then she closed her father's lids. "If he could talk," she murmured, "he would thank his brutal cousin for this."

"*Helas,*" mourned the little Canuck, "that I did not obey you and stay here, *mon compagnon.* Den I would 'ave keel ze *maudit!*"

"Hunt the Carcajou?" Peter's brows lifted. "I thought you hated Great Northern."

Pierre scratched his head, plainly bewildered. "*Sacre,* I am confuse, *mon ami.* Zis Carcajou, he keel my woman and burn my *cabane.* W'en I find eet, I tak' ze trail. Eet lead to Great Northern post. So . . . *preste* . . . Pierre hunt zem both."

It was Peter's first hint as to the urge that drove the nervy little man, and he made note of it. In his thirst for vengeance, Pierre



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would make small distinction between the real Carcajou and the Great Northern hireling who had taken his name in vain. Nor could Peter tell him.

Suddenly aware that the shooting had ceased outside, Peter eyed the Canuck condemningly. "Passey and his men have taken the post. How does it happen they are here so soon?"

The little man looked guilty. "Pierre give ze orders first, *mon ami.* I know eef you come here, you need 'elp. So I lead Passey and hees fightaires by trail. Zey hide een brush, while I meet you on top. We follow. Pierre dive under water gate; beeg Injun grab me, lock me up. W'en you let me out, ze fight ees on. Pierre run down to catch dem *maudit* from behind. Meet beeg Injun again. We fight. *Mon Dieu,* w'at a fight. Pierre keel heem. Now Passey load boats and tak' down to riviere, by gar."

Marie's eyes blazed. "Then you two come here to steal our furs."

"Steal is a hard word, Marie. Let us say to recover Independent peltry appropriated by Great Northern . . . or by Cullen Yost Flewellen, perhaps."

"You . . . you work for the Independents?"

"For and with them, Marie. This is war, never doubt it, and the little fur people will win it. You will have a grave here to tend, girl, and I who also have one would like to see you running this post, free of Great Northern shackles, friendly and fair to your Independent neighbors."

Her eyes were moist and she was nodding. "I do like the idea. I will declare this an Independent post. I shall stay here and work hard.

Peter's eyes were far away. "There are festering sores to bind up, blockades to smash, brooms to be sewn to sweep new horizons clean. Some day I shall return."

She touched his sleeve. "I will be waiting, Peter."

"Come Pierre," said Peter. "There must be an accounting of the furs, then we must take the trail. Somewhere we have a rendezvous with Cullen Yost Flewellen."

"And wiz zat *renegat*—Le Carcajou, *mon compagnon.* He 'elp us tonight but he no good anyhow. Pierre nevaire seeng again till I keel heem."

"Bien," said Peter, and pushed him toward the door. "And when there is wine, we will drink to it."

He lifted his hand to Marie, stepped away into the breaking dawn. *Une bonne chose et une mauvaise,* as Pierre would have had it. A good thing and a bad one.

THE END

(Continued from page 6)

grass, until all the earth was sheathed in ice several inches thick. That was followed by the kind of freezing wind that cuts off one's breath.

All this, at that time, was completely new to most of the Texans, with their thin clothing. The cowponies, used to the warm southern climate, were also hard hit, but, of course, the cattle suffered most of all. Sometimes they would attach themselves to bands of horses who had instinct enough to paw the snow for the frozen grass beneath.

I remember that one outfit started with 4000 head, and spring inventory showed less than a hundred of their cattle left. Ranchers were wiped out, and the cowboys working for them lost their lives in that disastrous, pitiless storm.

More than 250,000 cattle were lost in that little dress-rehearsal for the white hell that visited the cattle country in 1886-7.

We'll be willing to bet that the first Winter of the Big Die is well remembered, Mr. Hunter! But the chances are that the ravages were not so widely spread as that later one, which spelled ruin to cowmen from the Canadian line down through Texas itself.

The fact that a number of camels were tried out by the army for work on the Western deserts is generally known, but E. A. Fanshaw, of Hartford, points out that the army was not the only one to try using the ships of the desert.

Dear Strawboss:

During the boom times in Virginia City, nine camels were imported from Tartary to bring salt from Teal's marsh to the Sun Mountain mills. Soon other camel companies were organized, for the beasts were able to travel thirty-five miles a day, each carrying a burden of 800 pounds. Another advantage was that they would eat almost anything a goat would, and required very little care. However, they were not friends to the mule-skinners and bull-whackers who drove them—perhaps they didn't understand the famous vocabulary of our native skinners—and it seemed that their temperaments were also slightly different from the beasts that our men were used to dealing with. Also they had a habit of frightening horses and mules, and for that reason the caravans were usually brought up at night.

With the decline of the mines about Virginia City, the camels were discarded. I, for one, would like to know what happened to them? Were they sold to zoos in various cities; were they traded back to their native lands; did they all die off, or are there still some of the descendants wandering around in the unfrequented places of desert and remote mountains? If any of the Branding Corral gang knows the answer, I'd like to hear it.

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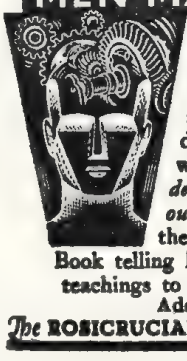

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★ UP THE TRAIL ★

IT WAS a full stage that rumbled its dusty way along the old Butterfield route in the heart of the Apache country, and its passengers were as varied as the scenery itself was monotonous. The company had been traveling for days; they had become as well acquainted as they were ever likely to get, and much more so than most of them wished.

An Eastern drummer, redolent of cigar smoke and whiskey seemed, boorishly, to enjoy puffing the last inch of his stogie, although it brought from the angular, old-maid school teacher the kind of glances that are supposed to kill. The gambler seemed at continuous and silent outs with the preacher, who looked on with a mixture of disdain and disgust as the card-sharp attempted to entertain himself with riffling through a deck of cards. The young rancher had never seen such a bunch of know-nothing greenhorns, and was not averse to showing his contempt at every opportunity, while, high on the box above them, the white-whiskered driver, sang and cursed tipsily to the mules that were drawing the mud-wagon ever closer to the relay station.

None of them, at the time, had heard the far-off fusillade of shots that signalled the approach of the Indians, but now they understood the cause of their wild ride only too well, when the driver yelled down to them: "Light and scatter, you folks. If any of you have a gun, now's the time to unlimber. We'll take shelter yonder!"

There was then no time for short tempers as they ran pell-mell toward their doubtful sanctuary. And for hours there, in the broiling sun, they managed to make a stand-off fight with the aid of the cowman's carbine, and the guns that the driver himself brought along.

When, after repelling one of the redmen's charges, the fat drummer sank down with a bullet-wound in his side, the prim, angular schoolmarm ripped off her petticoat to bind the wound, using her share of the small supply of water to cleanse it, and to offer the man a soothing drink. After which she set herself to loading the guns of the men. The preacher, his prejudices forgotten in the heat of battle, was siding the gambler and yelling through parched lips, "Brother, pass me that gun—I used to shoot a bit as a lad. Glory Hallelujah!"

The stage driver, his disdain for his human cargo forgotten, was silent and grim-lipped as he and the cowmen did their best to fend off the death that was so close.

At last it was over, and the small party of Indians retired. The fat drummer was helped back into the wrecked stage by the very same ones who had silently condemned him a few hours before, while the driver started afoot for the next relay station and help.

Somehow, during that time of blood and extreme danger, those people had undergone a change that was to be remembered by each of them throughout the rest of their lives. It seemed as if each one had somehow awakened to the fact each had a right to live as he saw fit, so long as it did not interfere with the rights of the others. And while we don't pretend to know if they ever met again, we can draw a parallel to those passengers who found themselves after that trial by fire.

For sometimes it takes just such a bitter and dangerous experience to bring out in each of us the spirit of humanity that is there, like gold beneath the surface of prejudices. Sometimes, too, it takes something like the national catastrophe of war to bind us closer together, even though it be in grief, to make the unified effort which is necessary to preserve our nation. That is when we may forget our own selfishness, our religious or political prejudices and with a good heart, apply ourselves together to the great work that lies before all of us.

—The Editors

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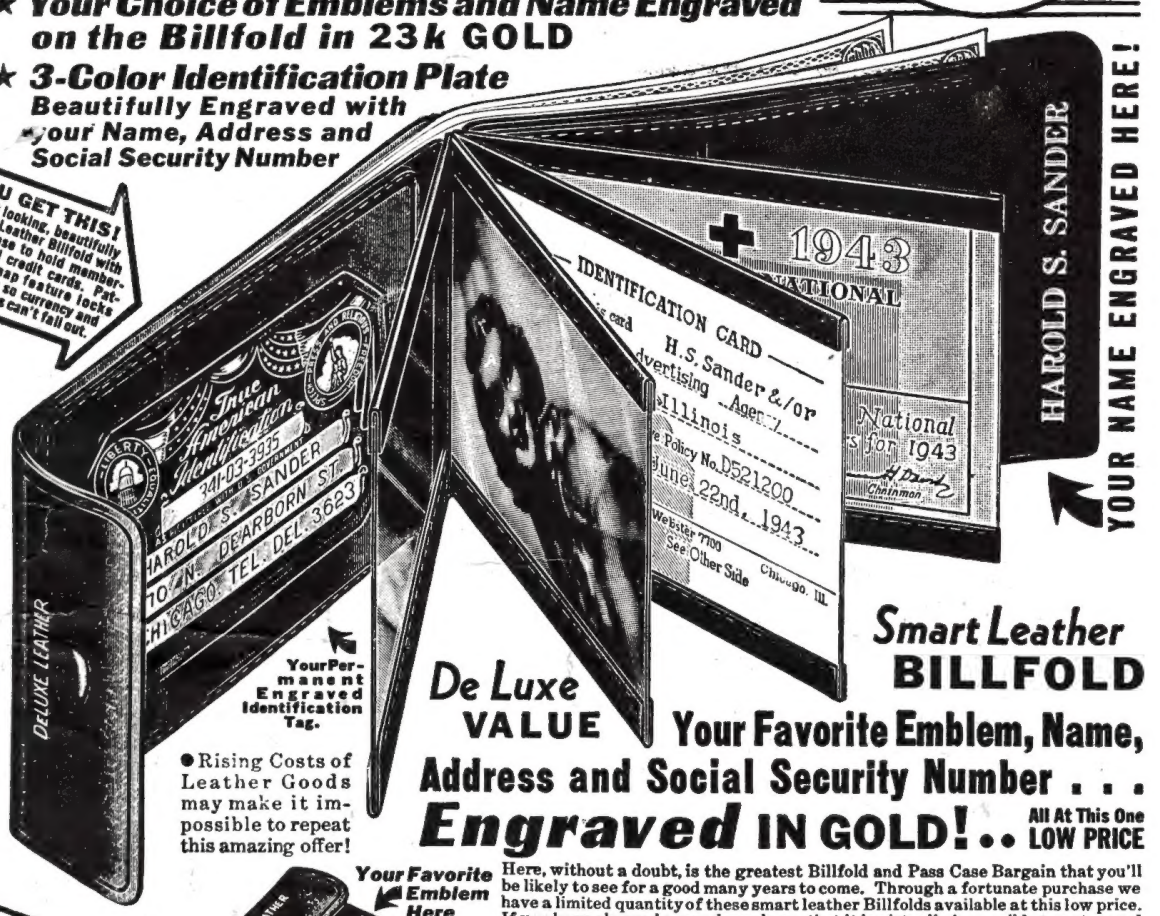

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